



# Medical oasis in Sinai



President Hosni Mubarak this week inaugurated the largest ever military hospital in Sinai, just south of El-Tor, where all patients can gaze at the blue waters of the Gulf of Suez from their rooms.

The 201-bed hospital is the first in a series of military medical facilities planned for selected strategic locations and population centres throughout the country. One, billed as the largest in the Middle East, is being built at kilometre 45 on the Cairo-Ismailia highway. It will be constructed and equipped with US aid, and American medical crews will operate it for three years, during which time they will

train Egyptian medical teams. The hospital will then be turned over to Egypt. Construction is expected to be completed in 1998. Another military hospital is being built at Fayed, about halfway between Ismailia and Suez along the Suez Canal.

The Sinai hospital has a total area of 75,000 square metres. It consists of four major structures — a two-storey main building with four wings to house the patients, two resthouses for doctors and nursing personnel and a hotel to accommodate patients' relatives. The buildings cover a total of 5,200 square metres, while the remaining land has been studded with lawns and trees. There is

also a special helicopter ramp.

Maj-Gen. Moqbil El-Shafei, director of the Military Engineering Corps, told *Al-Ahram Weekly*: "This is the first hospital of its kind in Sinai. In the main building, which houses the patients' rooms, the Gulf waters can be seen from all the

rooms."

The hospital, officially named the Mubarak International Military Hospital, was built at a cost of LE42 million. Besides military personnel, the hospital will extend emergency medical services to the residents of the South Sinai Governorate, as well as tourists visiting the region. South Sinai Governor Mamduh El-Zohary told the *Weekly*:

that, specifically, the hospital will serve tourists visiting the resorts of Sharm El-Sheikh, Dahab, St Catherine's and Nuweiba in addition to Ras Sudr, an oil-producing town on the eastern coast of the Gulf of Suez.

In carrying out the hospital project, El-Zohary said, military authorities had taken into account the mountainous terrain of the peninsula and the vast distances that have to be covered.

"Thus the hospital features a flying first aid service comprising a number of helicopters to transport passengers and offer services at any point," El-Zohary said. The hospital also has an international telephone service and other tele-

communications facilities such as telex and fax. All its ambulances are fitted with radio facilities.

The hospital is largely computerised and has the most advanced medical equipment. All patients' rooms are air-conditioned and equipped with telephones and TV sets. The hospital has eight intensive care units, three large operating theatres, one small operating theatre, as well as nine out-patient clinics.

At the inauguration ceremony, Defence Minister Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi told Mubarak that in all, 11 military hospitals are currently under construction.

## Secret debate worries journalists

A Shura Council committee has begun discussing the new draft press law, but journalists are worried about the outcome. **Mona El-Nahhas** reports

An amended press law is currently under scrutiny in the Shura Council's Legislative Committee, but the decision to have the discussions behind closed doors has left journalists worried and sceptical.

The new draft is intended to replace Law 93 of 1995, which infuriated journalists and touched off a controversy that led to counter-action by the Press Syndicate, followed by government measures to redress journalists' grievances, centring on what journalists perceive as the restrictive nature of the legislation.

Presidential intervention was a key factor in the process. President Hosni Mubarak ordered the formation of a special committee to prepare a draft for a new law. The committee consisted of public figures, journalists and legal experts. The draft, along with recommendations for modifications by the Press Syndicate, went to the Shura Council last month. The council referred the draft measure and the syndicate's proposed amendments to its Legislative Committee to come up with a final draft. But the committee's decision last Sunday to hold debates in camera worried most journalists.

However, members of the committee assured that journalists have no reason to be uneasy. "We're nothing against journalists. All of us respect press freedom, and will do the best we can to formulate a balanced draft," insisted Shura Council member Ahmed Salama. He added: "It's preferable to keep discussions confidential in order not to incite public debate while the draft is still in the preparatory stage." The committee would make a full announcement when it had completed the final draft, he promised.

A reliable source at the committee, who asked that his name be withheld, has revealed a split between committee members on the question of articles related to the dismissal

of journalists, with several members insisting that the opinion of the Press Syndicate in this matter should not be binding, and that the publishing house should have the final say.

The committee debate is expected to end on 25 May. The committee will send its final draft back to the Shura Council for further discussion. The draft will then go to the People's Assembly to be enacted.

Within the next few days, the Press Syndicate's council will hold a meeting to follow up the latest developments and decide what steps to take to guarantee that the amendments it seeks will be included in the new draft.

Former Press Syndicate chairman Kamel Zohri said that the current stage was crucial, "requiring all of us to be cautious and vigilant, until the draft reaches its final stage." He criticised the syndicate for not coordinating with journalists who are also Shura Council members. "This would guarantee that the draft was kept safe during closed discussions and that our recommendations would be taken into consideration," he argued.

Leftist syndicate member Salah Eissa, who strongly opposed the new draft, describing it as Law 93 in another guise, is not optimistic. "I don't think the outcome will be in our favour," he said. "Most of our recommendations will be rejected, especially the suggestion of cancelling the imprisonment penalty. The general trend among committee members, most of whom are pro-government, is to lower even the minimum standard [of journalists' rights] we reached in the draft, believing that it's more what we deserve. They think that journalists want to take everything and offer nothing in return."

Adel Hussein, an Islamist writer, also expressed disquiet about the outcome of the committee's debate. Hussein hopes that the "intelligent and broad-minded elements in the government will avoid repeating the old mistake, and will end this prolonged crisis."

Maged Mehana, a member of the Press Syndicate Council, asserted that the council's efforts would not stop until journalists obtained a "civilised" draft. He added that the General Assembly of the Press Syndicate would re-convene on 19 May or as soon as the Shura Council concluded its debate.

The new draft reverses a provision in Law 93 authorising prosecutors to take journalists into custody while they are under investigation for a publication offence. It also gives the judge, in most cases, the option of punishing an offending journalist either by imprisonment or a fine. Under Law 93, many publication offences are punishable by both.

In the first official response to a truce offer by Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiya's lawyer Montasser El-Zayyat, Interior Minister Hassan El-Alfi said that his ministry had no information on the initiative and that it would not talk with militant groups. He described the initiative as "a mere illusion promoted by lawyers who belong to the terrorist groups".

"Any contacts with these groups are to be rejected by all means. There can be no dialogue with the killers and criminals who betray their own country," he said.

The minister pointed out that such attempts would not keep the security forces from continuing to confront the militants and their deviant ideologies to safeguard Egypt's stability and social cohesion.

Information Minister Safwan El-Sherif has also dismissed reports that the government was considering a call from Montasser El-Zayyat, lawyer for the militant groups Jihad and Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiya, for a one-year truce between the government and the militant groups, which El-Zayyat claims would bring an end to the militants' violence.

El-Zayyat's initiative came shortly after Khaled Ibrahim, the spiritual leader of Al-

## Old party torn by succession struggle

The general congress of a divided Wafid Party, originally slated to meet today but delayed until an unspecified date later this month, is expected to witness a stormy session marked by a tug-of-war between two factions vying for supremacy. During the session, the congress will elect members of the supreme committee, the body responsible for making major policy decisions. According to the party statutes, 40 members are elected to the committee and another 10 are appointed by Fouad Serageddin, the party leader. It has become an open secret that some of the conference's 1,200 members will demand the cancellation of the post of deputy leader.

Like most opposition political parties in Egypt, the Wafid is ridden with internal disputes. Disension usually rises to fever pitch just before the party's general congress convenes.

The main contest is between Yassin Serageddin, the party leader's younger brother, and No'man Gomaa, the party's deputy leader.

The two are competing for the leader's post after the retirement or demise of the elderly Serageddin, who is 85. Fouad Serageddin called for the congress meeting after returning to work from a long sick leave. The timing of the session gave rise to speculation among party members that Fouad Serageddin might announce his retirement from party leadership.

Wafid members are divided into two camps: supporters of the younger Serageddin, who heads the party's parliamentary bloc, and those who favour No'man Gomaa, the party's deputy leader.

Gomaa predicted that "new blood" will be injected into the supreme committee, "mostly that of businessmen and experts in all fields who have kept a low profile in the past."

Asked who he expects to be Fouad Serageddin's successor, Yassin Serageddin said that he will not accept anyone outside the Serageddin family. "It is for the benefit of the party; after all, we are the founders."

The younger Serageddin and Gomaa have little in common. Gomaa is known for his strong opposition to the government and his good connections with other members of the party, while Serageddin has the advantage of the family name and being one of the party founders. However his critics claim that he is not popular within party ranks and is some-

times resented for his frequent pro-government stances and connections.

This became evident recently when Serageddin voted in favour of the government's policy statement in parliament while Fouad Badawi and Ayman Noor, other Wafid members, voted against it. "It is not a matter of being pro-government or anti-government. I express the Wafid ideas that do not oppose for the sake of opposition," Yassin Serageddin said in his own defence.

But according to Mona Qorashi, a prominent Wafid member who was expelled last November for running for parliament against the party's will, "Gomaa's lobby within the party is much stronger than Serageddin's. Gomaa is fair; he does not use his position to serve his own interests. He criticises the government only when needed."

Qorashi has filed a lawsuit to contest her expulsion from party ranks. "I was expelled by a decision from the party leader, which is against the party's statutes since two-thirds of the higher committee have to agree to it," she added, however, that "I will not go to a place in which I'm not welcome."

The Wafid Party, a staunch advocate of political and economic liberalism, occupied the centre stage of domestic politics between 1919 and 1952. Suppressed — along with other opposition parties — for a quarter of a century by post-revolutionary governments, the Wafid staged a comeback in 1978 after the nation reverted to the multi-party system.

Late President Anwar El-Sadat seemed to have second thoughts a few months later, issuing a decree prohibiting those who had held high positions before the revolution from political party membership. The decree appeared to be directed personally against Wafid leader Fouad Serageddin and then Secretary-General Ibrahim Farg. In reaction, the Wafid decided to "freeze" its activities. Serageddin and many other prominent figures were jailed by Sadat one month before his assassination in October 1981, but were freed shortly afterwards by President Hosni Mubarak. Two years later, the Wafid staged a comeback but never regained the wide popularity it enjoyed before 1952.

## An end to Islamist violence?

The interior minister shrugged off an initiative proposed by Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiya's lawyer to suspend militant violence for one year, saying that a dialogue could not be conducted with 'criminals', reports **Omayma Abdel-Latif**.

Gama'a Al-Islamiya in Aswan, currently serving a 15-year sentence for attacking two officers guarding a church in Aswan in 1993, proposed a one-year halt in the campaign of violence. Ibrahim said that his faction was willing to give up the armed struggle and made a plea for all Gama'a members "to respond positively to this call".

El-Zayyat claims that a truce would allow moderate elements within the Islamist movement a chance to have the upper hand over the proponents of violence. "For the sake of the stability and security of the country and the people". However, he is still waiting for approval for the initiative from the Gama'a and Jihad leaderships.

He stressed that the initiative was not, at this stage, an attempt to bring the government to the negotiating table. "This is a one-sided initiative on the part of the Islamist groups. We are not asking the government to do anything. The gov-

ernment cannot be party to such an initiative. We tried to involve it in the past but our attempts were doomed to failure," El-Zayyat told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

According to El-Zayyat, Khaled Ibrahim had intended to deliver a statement renouncing violence and calling on other groups to join a peace pact at Sunday's court session ending the case for which he is now serving a jail sentence. However, he claims that he was not permitted to do so.

A security source, who asked that his name be withheld, described the initiative as "another hoax" which should not be taken seriously. "They have lost the battle after the success of recent government clampdowns, so they are seeking an honourable end to their dirty war by suggesting a one-sided initiative to rescue what they can from the situation," the source said.

And Information Minister El-Sherif insisted that the government was not considering any

deal with the militants and would be unlikely to discuss El-Zayyat's proposal. "The cabinet has not discussed this initiative and there was no mention of it in the interior minister's report which was discussed during the cabinet meeting this week," said El-Sherif. "I don't think this is an issue that the cabinet will discuss."

The militant initiative came shortly after the Gama'a claimed responsibility for the killing of 18 Greeks tourists in Cairo, and two senior officers in a police ambush two weeks ago in El-Aishman, north of Malawi in El-Minya governorate. It also follows government crackdowns on Gama'a strongholds in the southern provinces of El-Minya and Assuit.

El-Zayyat maintains that support for the initiative has been gaining ground among the younger generation of militants. However, he remained uncertain of the prospects of approval from the groups' leaders. "We have not received a response from the leaders of the Jihad or Gama'a as yet," he said earlier this week. "I can only hope they respond positively."

Edited by **Wadie Kirolos**

الآن من أجل

It was a turbulent week in parliament as ruling NDP and opposition members opened heavy fire on alleged corruption. Gamal Essam El-Din attended

## Storm over family planning funds

For the second time during its ongoing parliamentary session, the People's Assembly this week referred the third stage of a \$190-million United States Agency for International Development (USAID) family planning grant to the Central Auditing Agency for investigation. Under scrutiny by both the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) and opposition MPs is the alleged misappropriation of funds, and, at the top of their hit list was the Ministry of Health and Population (MOHP) and former Minister of Population, Maher Mahgoub, now chairman of the National Population Council (NPC).

The NPC is one of three agencies charged with implementing this project which aims at reducing the country's population growth rate to 1.8 per cent per year and the fertility rate to 2.7 per cent by the year 2007 by increasing the efficiency of family planning methods and improving birth control services in rural areas and cities. The other two agencies are the Ministry of Health and Population and the Ministry of Information.

The issue this time was sparked off by the fact that the grant agreement was sent to the Assembly for approval to increase the bud-

get of the third stage from \$20 million to \$30 million, according to Sherif Omar, chairman of the parliament's Health Committee. But, this is not the first time it has been brought up in the Assembly. He said that while similar questions concerning the budgeting of the grant had been raised by MPs, the government failed to respond as a result of the cabinet reshuffle.

During this session, however, the criticism poured forth freely. "I am sure that family planning is now a matter of life and death, but we want to know what money we received [from USAID since 1978], and how it was spent," said Zekaria Azmi, a leading NDP deputy from Zenith. "It is no secret that most of the grant's allocations are spent on incentives, bonuses, luxury cars and advertisements," he asserted.

Directing his questions to the Minister of Health and Population, Ismail Salam, Azmi stated, "I want the minister of health to respond to me about a letter from USAID requesting that the MOHP investigate how LE\$11,000 of the grant was spent without any justified reason."

The leader of the NDP parliamentary ma-

jority, Ahmed Abu Zeid, took matters a step further by recalling how he was offered a sum of money at the end of a lecture course on family planning which he had attended. Cases like this pointed to the misappropriation of funds.

"It is clear that the second stage of the agreement was rife with shady dealings such as removing the seats from fully-loaded imported cars and using the vehicles to transport construction materials to the villages of former officials concerned with population issues in Egypt," said Ayman Nour, a Wafdist MP. The doling out of exorbitant bonuses, he said, was another example. Nour presented Salam with a document revealing his approval of a 400 per cent bonus to the MOHP's first under-secretary, Samir Sultan. Handouts, he said, have also found their way into the pockets of religious leaders and intellectuals who agree not to speak out against family planning.

Other MPs like El-Badri Farghali, representing the leftist Tagammu Party, directed their questions at other state institutions like Al-Azhar. "I want to know where Al-Azhar and the Awqaf Ministry (religious endowments)

stand on this issue, since they are really the bodies with a role to play," said Farghali. He also criticised the role played by USAID in Egypt, and stated, "This report [of the Assembly's Health Committee] talks about reducing the fertility rates in Egypt. I don't know why this US agency is after even our fertility rates."

While misappropriation of funds served as the focus of the debate, it became quickly evident that the issue of family planning policies as a whole was being called into question. Sameh Sobeh, an NDP MP from Qamiet, north of Cairo, said the information provided in the media on family planning devices is by no means sufficient, and called for the establishment of "committees on a grassroots level in each village which would be responsible for controlling the fertility rates in each home."

Tackling the complaints one by one, Health and Population Minister Salam emphasised that population control is one of Egypt's main problems now. "This is why it requires the efforts of the whole nation, not just the executive agencies," he said, adding that the MOHP has great potential to move

on this issue "by uniting efforts and training MOHP personnel."

Addressing the issue of misallocation of funds and "shady dealings", Salam stated that some of the grant money was used to revamp 800 family planning clinics and train their staff. He also noted that the case surrounding the letter submitted by USAID concerning how LE\$11,000 of the grant was spent was referred to the Administrative Prosecution for investigation.

With the issue of bonuses and incentives on the table, Salam said, "Yes, I give all hard-working employees who work from 8am to 8pm bonuses, and I would not hesitate to give them 20-times their salaries."

"But no one in the minister's office," he said, "receives money from this grant."

As the debate drew to a close, MPs overwhelmingly approved a request to refer the whole issue to the Central Auditing Agency (CAA).

The Assembly has to date discussed around 11 agreements signed with USAID, of which five were sharply criticised and two referred to a fact-finding commission and the CAA for closer investigation.

## Crucial amendment

THE PEOPLE'S Assembly's Legislative and Constitutional Affairs Committee has approved a legal amendment stipulating that any case files in any court should be based on a direct personal interest, otherwise it will be rejected.

The amendment was to modify article 3 of the Commercial and Civil Pleading Law. The committee's action, which must be endorsed by the full Assembly before taking effect, would apply to all cases, including those that are pending in courts.

The amendment was approved with surprising speed by a vast majority of committee members, most of them belonging to the ruling National Democratic Party, on Monday. However, it was strongly attacked by Justice Minister Farouq Seif El-Nasr during the debate. He even threatened to withdraw from the committee meeting if the amendment was approved. But he did not attend the voting session.

The amendment was submitted by the Assembly member for Talkha city, in Daqahliya Governorate, Rifaat El-Krimy. The justice minister based his rejection on the premise that the government could not approve a new law "decreed mainly to serve one person." Mohamed Guweily, the committee's deputy chairman and MP for Shubra in Cairo, said the amendment clearly comes in favour of Dr Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid, a professor at Cairo University's Faculty of Arts, who faces a court ruling that separates him from his wife.

Last year, a Cairo court of appeal ordered Abu Zeid separated from his wife after convicting him of apostasy. Some lawyers, acting on behalf of Abu Zeid, contested the ruling before the Court of Cassation, Egypt's highest tribunal. They argued that the case filed in the appeals court by Sheikh Youssef El-Badri, an Islamist, was not based on direct personal interest. The new amendment, once ratified by the full assembly, could come in Abu Zeid's favour. The Court of Cassation is scheduled to issue its final ruling next month.

## Former minister blasted

Leader of the opposition Wafid Party Yassin Serageddin launched an attack in the People's Assembly this week against the performance of former *Al-Awqaf* (religious endowments) minister and the Assembly's deputy for Helwan, Mohamed Ali Mahgoub.

Serageddin seized the opportunity of a debate on a report prepared by the Assembly's Committee of Religious and Social Affairs and *Awqaf* to accuse Mahgoub of failing to control corruption during his tenure at the ministry. The committee's report was written in response to criticism from the Central Auditing Agency (CAA) in a report on the performance of *Al-Awqaf* Ministry and the Egyptian *Awqaf* Organisation (EWO) during the period from October 1992 to September 1993.

Serageddin said he planned to table a parliamentary interpellation regarding the charges against Mahgoub, who was sacked in January's government reshuffle. "When he was in his ministerial post, plunder and looting reached their climax and corruption was rampant," Serageddin claimed, pointing out that Mahgoub was currently under investigation by the prosecutor general, and that the EWO's former chairman had been sent to trial before a criminal court for failing to enforce court rulings.

"As a deputy of the people, call for a confrontation of the problems listed in the CAA report, including those concerned with the misappropriation of mosque donations [*nozoor*], the awarding of contracts, *Awqaf* and recovering EWO money," said Serageddin. He called on the newly appointed *Awqaf* Minister, Hamdi Zagzouq to rectify these problems.

However, Serageddin himself came in for some major criticism from deputies from the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Foremost among them was Abdel-Rehim El-Shouf, a member from Qena in Upper Egypt, and head of the Assembly's Youth Committee. He stoutly defended El-Mahgoub, emphasising that accusations against ministers should not be based on hearsay nor made for political motives. "We [NDP members] do not praise a minister while he is in his post and then attack

him when he leaves," said El-Ghoul. He asserted that El-Mahgoub was a proficient politician who had achieved a lot on behalf of the nation, including bringing 150,000 mosques under the direct supervision of the Ministry of *Al-Awqaf* and instituting a large number of training programmes for mosque *imams*. These moves were largely intended to prevent the preaching of militant Islam in the nation's mosques.

This seemed to wrong-foot Serageddin, who reacted by rejecting any criticism of his own party's ideology. "The Wafid's ideology is to safeguard citizens' rights. When the interpellation comes, you will hear some incredible things," Serageddin said.

According to the new *awqaf* minister, Hamdi Zagzouq, most of the allegations of corrupt practices listed in the CAA report had been referred to the prosecutor general's office for investigation, while efforts were being made by the EWO to collect outstanding debts, mainly in the form of rent payments from *awqaf* land leased to tenants. Zagzouq said that a new EWO chairman had been appointed and that a total review of the EWO's administration was being conducted to ensure that regulations and policies were strictly adhered to.

"As a matter of fact, we do not cover up corruption and the misappropriation of funds; we fight against it," said Zagzouq, adding that the ministry had allocated LE\$8.5 million between 1993 and 1995 to support mosques.

Zagzouq also defended Mahgoub. "We fully appreciate Mahgoub. The fact remains that the CAA was critical of



Waifid MP Yassin Serageddin conferring during a heated parliamentary session, with NDP leaders Yousef Wali and Kamal El-Shazli

all state institutions, and the Ministry of *Al-Awqaf* was no exception," he said.

Discussion of Mahgoub's role took a surprising twist when Rabab Hilal Hemida, the single deputy representing the opposition Liberal Party, surprised MPs by condemning the attacks on Mahgoub. In last December's parliamentary election, Mustafa Bakri, editor of *Al-Ahram*, the Liberal Party's newspaper, had stood against Mahgoub in Helwan. Mahgoub won the election, but Bakri made use of the party newspaper to launch a press campaign against him, accusing him of corruption. Mahgoub responded by filing a lawsuit against Bakri.

Then, in last Monday's session, Hemida, who as the Liberal Party's secretary-general, was fully expected to join Serageddin in his attack on Mahgoub, said instead

that he was not prepared to accuse anyone without sufficient evidence. "It is true that the former *Al-Awqaf* minister and other *Awqaf* leaders are being investigated by the prosecutor-general and state security prosecution, but investigations are still under way. That hasn't been a final judgement yet," Hemida said.

He too cited the fact that the CAA had criticised various ministries in its report, but that parliamentary discussions had not taken the form of personal attacks on the ministers concerned. Observers were quick to note that Hemida's words were conspicuously absent from the following day's parliamentary coverage in the Liberal Party's newspaper, *Al-Ahram*.

Debate also centred on *nozoor* (donations), money given mainly to old mosques, often containing the tombs of popular religious figures. The CAA investigation had discovered that most of this money, intended for mosque upkeep and restoration, found its way into the pockets of mosque caretakers. The report urged the Ministry of *Al-Awqaf* to tighten its control over these funds. MPs commented that it was deplorable that the money was misappropriated, especially as many old mosques were still in need of restoration after the 1992 earthquake.

According to *Awqaf* Minister Zagzouq, the total revenue of *nozoor* is around LE4 million annually, and mosque staff take around 25 per cent of this total. He said that the ministry had spent as much as LE171 million on renovating around 1,600 mosques, and a further LE100 million on an additional 287 mosques. "We need LE390 million to conduct more renovation work, so *nozoor* revenue is just a drop in the ocean in any case," he added.

Discussions on *nozoor* took an ideological turn when Sameh Ashour, the only Nasserite MP in the Assembly, sharply criticised the concept of *nozoor* as a popular tradition of giving money to honour a Muslim holy man (or woman). "We are not idol worshippers," he argued. "Nozoor is not a folk tradition of this sort; rather it is money given to help the poor and orphans and for the renovation of mosques."

## British beef confiscated

CAIRO airport authorities seized a 3-ton British beef consignment invalid for consumption. Authorities were alerted to the matter after a security guard noticed a particularly pungent smell emanating from one of the refrigerators in the cargo section, which was the one carrying the beef.

Upon examination, quarantine station officials determined the meat unfit for human consumption. The beef was confiscated in the presence of the British company's representative.

## Business news

### Arab world directory

AN ARAB world commercial directory will be distributed soon. Seventeen countries are included in this directory.

Sameh El-Hadi, general manager of the Experience Marketing Co, sole agent in the Arab world for the directory, said that the publication of such a directory will help boost commercial exchange among Arab countries.

Sameh added that the aim of increasing economic cooperation comes at a time when the Arab world must face many of the newly-formed trade blocs which have developed all over the world.

### Egyptian-EU talks

AMBASSADOR Gamal El-Bayoumi, aide to the Egyptian foreign minister, stated that talks with the EU are underway to reach a partnership agreement soon.

The two sides have not yet agreed on some articles.

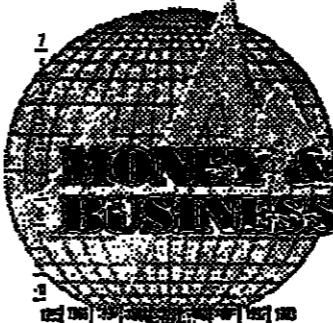
The ambassador, who heads the Egyptian side in these talks, added that he discussed with his European counterparts during the first two days, means of pushing talks between the two sides.

### Oil for food talks resume

LAST MONDAY, Iraq and the United States resumed oil for food talks in New York.

Tarek Aziz, Iraqi deputy premier, said that the negotiating team left Baghdad heading to New York for the third round of talks that stopped on 24 April after objections were raised by Britain and the United States. On the other hand, Iraqi newspapers called for the stopping of the United States' intervention in these talks.

## MONEY & BUSINESS



## NBE: A leading position

GUIDED by its long-standing experience along 98 years, the National Bank of Egypt (NBE) is rendered to be one of the main pillars of the national economy. This is manifested in its pioneering role in the Egyptian banking system in addition to its sound presence in the Arab world and internationally.

In the light of the bank's pioneering role in accelerating the national economy and the banking system, NBE has initiated various activities, mainly:

— NBE has been the first Egyptian bank to market its services and activities via the international information network, the Internet, accessible to 45mn persons. The said network enables its members worldwide and in no time to have access to NBE's latest services, whether traditional or non-traditional, besides investment opportunities in all fields.

On the other hand, the Internet covers all different fields of information all over the world, thus facilitating the preparation of the bank's studies and research, which are the bank's main assets on formulating its technical and administrative decisions.

Moreover, the bank may currently use the widespread Internet in dispatching and receiving electronic mail from and to any place in the world in just a few seconds.

— In terms of penetrating non-traditional fields to enhance investment and the money market in Egypt, NBE has embarked upon establishing two leasing companies. The first will be established in cooperation with the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the Japanese Orix Group being the leading company worldwide in the field of leasing. The second will be established in cooperation with the German

Bank of Commerce and a group of local businessmen.

The first company shall be specialised in light equipment with a capital of LE20mn, where foreign participation accounts for 61 per cent. Meanwhile, the company is currently established to be the first company in this field in Egypt. The second company shall be specialised in heavy equipment, with an initial capital of LE20mn in the first phase. The German partner shall participate with 35 per cent, leaving the remaining portion for Egyptian partners headed by NBE.

The multiplication of foreign partners in each company is envisaged to prevent monopoly in the Egyptian market and provides for attaining optimal offers. In addition, it provides expertise and fuel competition among foreign partners for the best level of performance in the market.

LEADING figures in global marketing communications will address the International Advertising Association's (IAA) 35th World Congress, "Visions: Communicating with Consumers in a Multimedia World", June 9-12 1996 at the Korea Exhibition Centre in Seoul, Korea. The event will focus on three major areas with a full day devoted to each.

The IAA's global network comprises more than 3600 members in 89 countries worldwide. It has also NGO consultative status with UNESCO and other UN agencies.

As is the practice that the host country of the succeeding IAA Congress hold a gala night to welcome and invite attendees to the coming congress, Egypt, host of the IAA 1998 Congress, will hold a gala night with an Egyptian oriental character under the name "Egyptian Night" on the congress' last day.

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## Selling privatisation politically

By Nemat Shafik

Privatisation is still sweeping the globe with an expected \$6 trillion in assets to be divested by public sectors around the world over the next 20 years. The fact that appropriately structured privatisation initiatives can result in vast improvements in the performance of firms is not debated much any more. The empirical evidence on efficiency and welfare gains that result from privatisation is now fairly solid. The new battleground is not efficiency, but distribution — who gets the gains that are realised? Which parties with a vested interest — managers, workers, consumers, or taxpayers — will benefit from privatisation?

In all countries politicians must cope with criticisms that privatisation is equivalent to selling the family silver; that assets are being given away cheaply; that corrupt methods were used; that too much foreign ownership results; that jobs will be eliminated and wages cut; and that consumers will have to pay higher prices for reduced service. Some of these criticisms reflect the fact that there will be winners and losers from privatisation. Therefore, politicians must find a way to compensate the losers without sacrificing the efficiency gains that privatisation is intended to achieve. Recent innovations in selling privatisation initiatives politically include more market-based methods for valuing firms (which benefit taxpayers), giveaways and under-pricing (which benefit citizens who apply to be shareholders), management buy-outs (which favour managers), employee share ownership schemes (which compensate workers), and "golden shares" or preferences for domestic investors to appease nationalistic fears of a foreign takeover.

No politician wants to be accused of selling public assets cheaply, especially where raising revenues is a priority for the government. Until recently, technical methods to value firms, such as earnings, discounted cash flow, asset values, dividends, and comparable companies or acquisitions, have been heavily utilised. Although such methods continue to play a role, there have been a variety of innovations that allow for a greater reliance on market mechanisms to set the prices of firms. These innovative methods include: (1) Auction methods that allow bidders to determine values; (2) Issuing shares based on a survey of institutional investors to insure pricing is consistent with market sentiment; and (3) Mass privatisation programmes that allow the public to determine the value of firms through their bids.

Governments are also increasingly using giveaways to win political support for privatisation. Where privatisation occurs through stock market flotation, governments often under-prices shares to realise widespread ownership and to make privatisation popular. In the United Kingdom, privatisation shares were "under-priced" by 37 per cent, while in the rest of the world under-pricing of privatisations averages around 24 per cent. In the former Soviet republics and much of Central and Eastern Europe, governments simply gave shares in state-owned companies to citizens for free under "mass privatisation programmes."

Appeasing nationalists fears of foreign or private sector control of "strategic" state-owned enterprises can be achieved through restrictions on the portion of shares which foreigners can own or preferences for domestic buyers. In about 85 per cent of privatisation schemes undertaken through stock market flotation worldwide, domestic investors have gotten preferential share allocations (but rarely get price discounts) and foreign investors, on average, have been allocated a maximum of 19-20 per cent of the total shares. Retaining public sector control through equity or "golden shares" that give government veto rights over major decisions is also very common. In almost all utility privatisations that have taken place in recent years, governments have retained golden shares but have never had to exercise these rights.

Management buy-outs have been widely used in countries where state-owned enterprise management has resisted privatisation or where outside investor interest in certain firms is limited. The success of management buy-outs depends critically on three factors: (1) Whether management has a sufficient equity stake in the form of a down payment; (2) Whether banks (not governments) have provided the financing required for such transactions, which tend to be highly leveraged; and (3) Whether incumbent management has (or has access to) the necessary skills and technical know-how to improve the performance of the firm.

Employee share ownership schemes are also a means of overcoming the frequent opposition to privatisation from labour which fears mass layoffs. Although there are many anecdotes about job losses associated with privatisation (especially since most state-owned enterprises are perceived to be over-staffed), the empirical evidence shows that the level of employment actually rises after privatisation. Workers can also benefit from privatisation through various other mechanisms, such as severance payments, higher wages or appreciation of preferential share allocations. In about 86 per cent of the privatisation share issues worldwide, there were some preferences granted to workers, with an average share allocation for employees reaching 6 per cent.

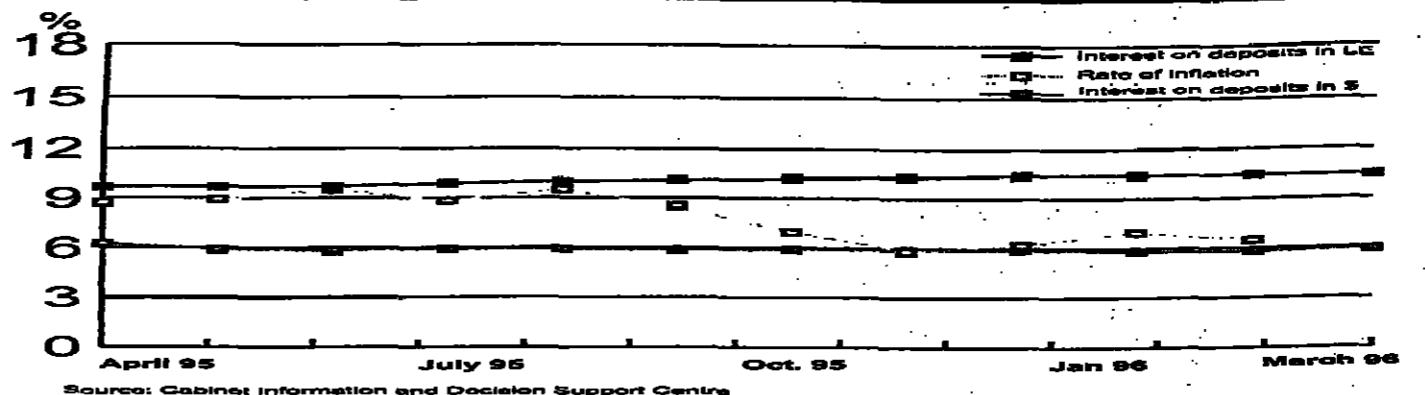
The key issue for the future is that selling privatisation politically does not compromise privatisation's efficiency objectives. Fortunately, most of these innovations are about improving the informational content of prices (like better valuation) or are about pure distribution of the benefits (such as mass privatisation, under-pricing public offerings, employee share ownership schemes or management buy-outs); in other words, who gets what. In some cases, the design of political compensation schemes has thwarted efficiency objectives such as when employee share ownership schemes do not allow workers to trade share freely, or where management buy-outs do not require managers to commit their own equity to the firm, or where mass privatisations are non-transparent and do not lay the basis for efficient asset markets. But these pitfalls can be avoided to insure that the distributional issues that privatisation raises do not undermine the primary objective of making firms more efficient.

The writer is a visiting professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania where she teaches a graduate course on international privatisation.

## Bank report gives mixed picture

A report recently submitted by the Central Bank of Egypt (CBE) to the People's Assembly revealed new developments in Egypt's monetary and financial situation. Gamal Essam El-Din reports

### Interest rates on deposits in LE and \$ and the rate of inflation



Source: Cabinet Information and Decision Support Centre

A 109-page Central Bank of Egypt (CBE) report for the fiscal year 1994/95 emphasised that the new IMF-inspired liberalisation policies adopted in May 1991 had a positive impact on the country's economy. Topping the list of benefits accrued was a remarkable LE2 billion decline in net credit provided to the public sector, while net credit provided for the private sector increased by LE7.2 billion. In fiscal 94/95, as much as LE16.5 billion was given to the private sector versus LE12.4 billion allocated to the public sector.

The report noted that although interest rates on bank savings and deposits decreased as a result of the new liberalisation policies, the local currency deposits in Egyptian banks increased from LE136.9 billion in 93/94 to LE156.5 billion in 94/95. In addition, foreign exchange deposits rose from \$17 billion in 93/94 to \$17.9 billion in 94/95. The report also showed that the state budget deficit fell to 1.6 per cent of GDP while the inflation rate increased to 9.9 per cent, or by 3.5 per cent over the previous year's figure.

On the other hand, revealed the report, Egypt's foreign debts jumped to \$33 billion in fiscal 1994/95, an increase of \$2.1 billion over the previous year's level. The value of local debts jumped by LE10.7 billion over the previous year's figure to reach LE134.7 billion. As a whole, Egypt's foreign and domestic debt is estimated at LE263.5 billion. The re-

port added that Egypt owes the Paris Club countries \$27.2 billion, or 8.6 per cent of the country's total foreign debt. Another \$3.8 billion is owed to a number of international lending institutions and \$700 million is owed to non-Paris Club countries.

At the top of the list of creditor countries are France and the US, to whom Egypt owes about \$6.6 billion each. Japan is third with \$5.55 billion and Germany is fourth with \$3.8 billion. The report noted that Egypt owes the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) \$2.79 billion. To meet its obligations, the CBE report said, Egypt has paid as much as \$1.9 billion, a \$1.21 billion increase over the previous year's debt servicing figure. Another LE13.2 billion were paid as part settlement on local debts.

The increase in the country's debts was hotly debated this week in the People's Assembly. In a question directed to Finance Minister Mohamed El-Gharib, Wafid MP Ayman Nour said he was "extremely alarmed" by the dramatic rise in the debt level reported by the CBE. Nour stated that Egypt's foreign debts increased from \$27 billion in June 1991 to \$33 billion in June 1995. Local debts, he said, increased from LE77 billion in June 1991 to LE133 billion in June 1995.

"This is by no means a positive indicator at all, and this continuous rise in debts could negatively affect development, the low-

income classes and the balance of payments," Nour said.

However, El-Gharib dismissed any negative effects of debts on development, stating that the gross national product (GNP) now stands at an estimated LE225 billion. "This means that these debts account for only five per cent of GNP." He added that this figure is not only small in relation to that of other countries, but is much lower than it was 15 years ago due to the writing off of a sizable part of Egypt's foreign debts following the Gulf War and the implementation of the government's reform programme aimed at raising growth rates.

"While most of these debts were used to establish a developed infrastructure in Egypt, great efforts are also being exerted to reduce the level of foreign borrowing," said El-Gharib. He stressed that liberalisation and privatisation policies will finally put an end to the government's borrowing.

Besides debts, the CBE report dealt with other aspects of the economy. Among these was the decline in Egypt's surplus in the balance of payments, which dropped from \$2.158 billion in fiscal 93/94 to \$759 million in 94/95. This decline was a result of a drop in direct foreign investments during the fiscal year.

The report also stated that imports increased by 20.3 per cent over the previous year's level, with the value of oil exports increasing from \$1.8 billion in fiscal 93/94 to \$2.2 billion

in fiscal 94/95. It also reported that the value of cotton exports increased sharply to \$300 million, while during the previous year it stood at \$45 million. The value of other exports rose to \$993 million.

The CBE report said that revenue from the Suez Canal increased in 94/95 by 3.4 per cent to reach \$2.1 billion.

Focusing on the issue of unemployment, the report revealed that the number of unemployed people rose to 1.7 million, or 9.6 per cent of the workforce that amounts to 16.5 million.

Touching on the performance of the banking sector, the CBE report said that the number of banks in Egypt declined to 81, but seven mutual funds with a paid-up capital of LE1.3 billion and nine stock exchange companies with a paid-up capital of LE9 million were established. As a result, the total number of stock exchange companies in Egypt rose to 38, with their overall capital reaching LE158.5 million.

During a discussion at the Assembly's Economic Committee, Nawal El-Tatagy, the minister of economy, said the banking sector moves in a carefully calculated way to maintain the inflation rate at 8.5 per cent. "Within this scenario, the future role of banks is to absorb any excessive monetary liquidity on the market while at the same time meeting the demand for credit," El-Tatagy said.

### EAB bonds issue

THE EGYPTIAN-American Bank (EAB) this Monday launched a five year registered bond issue worth LE200 million. The issue comprises negotiable bonds that cannot be converted to shares. Each will have a fixed coupon of 10.75 per cent.

The bonds will be available in the form of debentures valued at LE1,000, LE5,000, LE25,000, LE50,000 and LE100,000. Buyers receive 10 coupons with each debenture through which they will cash the yield at the coupon's expiry date.

The subscription will be open for 30-days, unless the issue is fully subscribed within 15-days, the minimum subscription period. Bonds will be listed in both the Cairo and Alexandria stock exchanges three months after subscription is closed.

In the case of over-subscription, the bank intends to allocate bonds to subscribers according to the ratio of their bid as a percentage of the whole issue. All subscription bids will be met, especially those submitted by small investors.

EAB, which has an authorised capital of LE100 million, is owned by the Bank of Alexandria (51 per cent) and the Amex Holdings, Incorporated (49 per cent).

### Floating pumps fixed

THE MINISTRY OF ECONOMY AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION recently signed an agreement with the Japanese Embassy whereby the ministry will receive LE10 million for the renovation or replacement of 11 floating pumps in Upper Egypt.

The agreement represents the implementation of the second phase of a grant provided by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) which aims at replacing or renovating 45 floating pumps in Upper Egypt. These pumps are needed to draw irrigation water from the Nile, which lies at a level lower than that of the cultivated lands. They are also the main source of irrigation water for about 20,000 feddans of land.

During the first implementation phase of the 10 floating pumps were replaced in two stages, costing a total of LE32.48 million.

The JICA is responsible only for supplying the needed machinery while the Mechanical and Electrical Department of the Ministry of Public Works and Water Resources will be responsible for operating and servicing the pumping stations.

### Trading takes a holiday

THERE was little trading action on the stock exchange during the week ending 2 May as a result of the three-day *Eid Al-Adha* and labour day holidays. Consequently, the volume of transactions plummeted to LE17.8 million the previous week. Along the same lines, the General Market Index slipped to 199.79 points. Shares of the Egypt Sponge Company lost LE3 per share to close at LE80.75 to level off at LE82.

Other companies, however, performed well despite the shortened work week. Shares of the Amoun Pharmaceuticals Company gained LE15 per share to close at LE152.

The financial sector index gained 0.48 to close at 202.92, with trading in shares of the Alexandria Commercial and Marine Bank accounting for LE5.19 million in shares or 29.13 per cent of the total value of market transactions. It was the Egyptian Expatriates Development and Investment Company, however, which cornered the largest percentage of the total volume of shares traded. Although trading in its shares accounted for 56.13 per cent of total dealings, the value of its shares fell by LE0.5 to close at LE14.25.

Shares of the Montazah Tourism and Investment Company registered the highest increase in share value, soaring in value by 60 per cent to top off at LE160.

Edited by Ghada Ragab

### The ecological dimension

The price of pollution and environmental degradation, experts assert, is often paid in the form of stunted economic growth. Reem Leila reports

Brought together by a World Net satellite transmission organised by the United States Cultural Centre, leading environmental experts recently stressed that developing countries, especially Egypt, will face dire economic and ecological problems resulting from the destruction of their environment.

Joel Makower, an environmental writer, speaking from Washington, said that serious environmental degradation significantly curbs Egypt's efforts at sustainable development and jeopardises economic growth and the health and livelihood of the country's citizens. "Egypt needs to get into the habit of adding the environmental dimension to such main indicators of wealth creation as food, technology, energy, commodity prices and financial transactions," he said.

Businesses operating in developing countries, said Robert Speidel, director of Public Equities at the Global Environmental Fund (GEF), cannot expect to move in, destroy the environment and then leave. He said people have begun to understand the fact that the destruction of their surrounding environment will affect their economy. Consequently, developing countries are no longer willing to ignore the issue, or to give something for nothing.

"Less conservative businesses are already turning the environmental degradation to their benefit," stated Speidel. "Factories that reduce their feed stock consumption and waste rather than increasing their scrubbing bills are the ones that increase their market viability in an environmentally-conscious world."

According to a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded comparative risk assessment undertaken in 1994, Cairo has the highest level of air pollution in the world in terms of suspended particulates and lead. This disastrously high level of particulates is responsible for 10,000

to 25,000 deaths per year. In addition, children raised in Cairo face the risk of losing an average of 4.2 IQ points as a result of lead pollution. And agriculture, which accounts for over 80 per cent of Egypt's water consumption, is another major victim of water pollution. As a result of water pollution, a large amount of Egypt's agricultural lands are threatened by desertification every year. Moreover, excessive use of fertilisers and pesticides, which doubled during the 1980s and 90s, seriously affected the size of the harvest.

According to James Goggin, acting director of USAID's Environmental Office in Cairo, certain procedures and measures should be taken to put an end to this issue. There are innovative, market-based ways of mobilising resources, he said, such as involving the private sector in financing environmental investments, managing water supplies, waste water disposal, sanitary landfills and special in-

dustry waste facilities on a user-charge basis. Other measures include increasing the price of water and electricity to force industry, services, middle and high-income consumers to shoulder the full cost of these resources. Moreover, raising taxes in order to increase revenues to be used in protecting the environment is another prudent measure that could be undertaken.

"Energy subsidies in Egypt are estimated at \$25 billion per year," he said.

In addition to existing environmental safeguards, USAID will introduce to a large part of the industrial sector new technology that will help them to save money and improve the quality of their products.

"Pollution prevention assessments have been performed in the public and private sectors in the fields of metal finishing, food processing and textiles," noted Goggin. "More than LE1 million in savings were realised in these three fields."

## Egypt-Taiwan ties budding

Expanding cooperation was the theme of a Taiwanese-Egyptian meeting of officials and businessmen. Niveen Wahish reports

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Final to a

Peace between Israel and Jordan appeared to be slipping away until France stepped in to mediate. Construction companies in the occupied territories are to be allowed to work in Jordan following a three-year stand-off between the two countries. The agreement, which was signed in Amman on 10 May, is intended to help the economy of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It also aims to encourage investment in the region. The deal is seen as a major breakthrough in the peace process. The agreement is seen as a major breakthrough in the peace process. The deal is seen as a major breakthrough in the peace process.

## Final status staggers to a start

As they stagger into the three-year final stage of the peace process, the PLO and Israel began talks this week by admitting their differences and finding common ground. Samia Nkrumah reports from Taba

By the time the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Israel had issued their joint communiqué last Monday, after inaugurating final-status talks in Taba, it was clear that a conclusive peace settlement remains a difficult target.

Nevertheless, the two-day talks saw both sides expressing their determination to pursue peace through agreed political processes. In practical terms, they agreed to form a joint steering committee comprising four or five persons from each side. The committee will be entrusted with the job of determining the elements of permanent-status negotiations and defining the framework and modalities of future talks. The next step would be to establish working groups which would meet regularly.

But the mutual resolve only highlighted the difficulties which the negotiators will face in the months and years to come. Chief Palestinian negotiator Mahmoud Abbas — better known as Abu Mazen — and his Israeli counterpart Uriel Savir, the director-general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, both repeatedly stated on several occasions during the Taba talks that future negotiations would not be easy.

Opening the way for the Palestinians and Israelis at the talks outlined their conflicting objectives. Two fundamental differences stood out. The first centred around Abu Mazen's reference to resolutions of "international legitimacy" and the second involved the question of Jerusalem.

There was speculation that the Israelis had pressured Abu Mazen to omit United Nations

Security Council Resolution 194 — concerning the right of return of Palestinian refugees who were driven from their homes in 1948 — from the Palestinian statement. But this was vehemently denied by both chief negotiators. Nevertheless, the omission was not without portent. It is a reminder that one side holds the stakes. The refugee issue should be on the agenda of the permanent-status negotiations, according to article five of the 1993 Palestinian-Israeli Declaration of Principles.

Abu Mazen, one of the architects of Oslo II, pointed out that while the military balance of power was in Israel's favour, the Palestinian question was at the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Without its settlement, comprehensive peace, to which all parties aspire, will be incomplete, he said.

Abu Mazen told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that the two sides did not disagree with the contents of each other's speeches, but had simply stated their differing positions. "We said that we aspire to a Palestinian independent state within the June 1967 borders and to have East Jerusalem, which falls within these borders, as its capital," he said.

The implementation of UN resolutions 242 and 338 was mentioned in the Palestinians' opening speech. While both resolutions make no mention of a Palestinian state, "they refer to an end of the Israeli occupation. What does an end to occupation, settlement of borders, security arrangements and relations with neighbours imply? Surely not a return to the occupation," snapped Abu Mazen.

Savir continued, "Closure is

for one reason only. We have clear alerts of continued suicide attacks. A few months down the line the situation will be much improved. We will gradually open up." Abu Mazen, on the other hand, felt the measures taken so far by the Israeli government to ease the closure were insignificant.

Savir spoke of a "people-to-people programme" which would encourage meetings between the Palestinian and Israeli peoples. "We are now better negotiators now. We are thinking together," he said. That may be true of the politicians whose body language said it all. Across the conference table, Gamal Al-Tarify, a member of the Palestinian team, was seen winking at Yoel Zinger, a legal advisor to the Israeli side and engineer of Oslo II.

At a reception for the delegates, Ambassador Adel El-Safti, first under-secretary at the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expressed Egypt's hope that the final-status talks would be concluded in less than three years and hopefully in two.

Commenting on the protracted closure of Gaza and the West Bank since a series of suicide bombings in Israel last February, Savir said, "I do not want to be critical of our Palestinian partners. If they had done a year ago what they are doing now, things would have been easier." He noted that the Palestinians were today waging a very courageous battle against Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, "not for us, but for their own interest and against those challenging their authority."

Savir continued, "Closure is

## Countdown beyond zero

Graham Usher, in Jerusalem, wonders whether final status negotiations will be as tortuous, bloody and inconclusive as their 'interim' predecessor

When Palestinian and Israeli negotiators met in Taba on 5 May to kick off Oslo's final status negotiations, their official stances vis à vis the issues of Jerusalem, Jewish settlements, refugees, borders and the political status of any future Palestinian entity were presented as absolutes.

On all the issues, said Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, "the gaps" between the two sides "are wider than ever before", reiterating that what Palestinians seek in any final settlement is Israel's withdrawal to its 1967 borders, the dismantling of all settlements and Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. Chief Israeli negotiator Uri Savir was more conciliatory. "For Israel, security is paramount," he said, though "there is the central issue of Jerusalem which we perceive as our united capital".

Such flourishes should be seen as aniseed to feed to the press. "Both parties will need three years [of negotiations] to get to know each other very well, to know their rights and obligations," said Chief Palestinian negotiator Mahmoud Abbas. "But we are not starting from zero."

They are surely not. The final status talks have been preceded over the last three years by literally hundreds of meetings on the final status issues between Israeli, Palestinian and other academics and politicians. The aim of such informal encounters was "to know each other's red lines and thereby reach agreement on principles in preparation for the [official] talks," says cabinet minister Yossi Beilin, who was the main mover on the Israeli side.

One fruit of these meetings was revealed by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* on 22 February when it published a joint Palestinian-Israeli document which it said represented an agreed summary of talks on a final status settlement held between Beilin and Abbas in October 1995.

The basic idea of the document is a final deal where Israel to keep 100,000 Jewish settlers under Israeli sovereignty. The remaining 40,000 or so settlers would then be given a choice: evacuate or live within a Palestinian entity. On Jerusalem, both sides agreed the city should remain (sic) "open and undivided" pending further negotiations, but with joint Palestinian-Israeli municipalities being evolved. In return, Israel would recognise a demilitarised Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, retain the Jordan River as its "security border" for 12 years and grant Palestinians the right to absorb refugees into their state on condition they renounce any "right of return" to their original homes inside Israel.

Many Labour Party members and intellectuals were enthusiastic about the document, since it appeared to represent a major retreat by Palestinians on the issues of Jerusalem, settlements and return. For the same reason, Palestinian Authority (PA) officials were wary, insisting that the document was not an "agreement" but only proposals submitted by Beilin for Abbas' "consideration". Palestinian President Yasser Arafat made no comment.

But Shimon Peres was furious. "I have seen the (Beilin-Abbas) document and I reject it outright," he said in February. This may have been pre-election bluster since Peres knows any hint of a deal "dividing" Jerusalem and settlements would be used by the Likud opposition against him. But many Palestinians are anxious that Peres disagrees with document precisely because of its endorsement of an independent Palestinian state.

On 24 April, Peres' Labour Party quietly dropped from its platform its long-standing opposition to a Palestinian state "west" of the Jordan River. But the Israeli leader has never been an advocate of a separate Palestinian state (except perhaps in Gaza), preferring instead a settlement in the West Bank around a Palestinian-Jordan confederation. This would be based on what Peres has called "functional authority", where the three peoples would be separate politically but where their economies would be integrated, with open borders and "shared" resources.

The danger many Palestinians see in this scenario is that while it would not preclude a symbolic form of statehood, it would preclude any independent sovereignty. In such a vision, much of the West Bank's land and resources would be absorbed territorially into Israel while the West Bank's 1.3 million Palestinians would be annexed demographically to Jordan.

Peres' comments on this score do little to ease Palestinian apprehension. When pressed by an Israeli journalist as to why he was so outraged by the Beilin-Abbas document, Peres snapped, "Who says there must be a Palestinian state? The main principle [for Israel] is not to control another people". And, in a special "Passover" interview with the *Jerusalem Post* on 9 April, Peres reaffirmed that his "position" on settlements in any final status deal is "not to dismantle them and not to add to them".

On this at least, Peres' actions have been true to his word. Over the last 18 months, the Israeli army has built 26 new bypass roads in the West Bank and Gaza. These have confiscated around 21 sq km of West Bank and Gaza territory and, added together, are 220 km in length. Their ostensible purpose is to service the 133 Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. But a subsidiary effect, says Palestinian geographer Khalil Tafakji, is to "isolate the main Palestinian towns one from the other" and so prevent any "territorial contiguity" emerging between them. The roads have cost the Israeli government a cool \$350 million to construct. "They are hardly temporary measures," says Tafakji.

On 5 May — after hearing that "no date had been set" for the Israeli army's stalled redeployment in Hebron — Israeli Environment Minister Yossi Sarid accused Peres of "giving in to pressure and threats" from Israel's religious parties and settler lobby. But Palestinians fear that the Israeli leader is "giving in" to nothing except Israel's colonial ambitions in the West Bank. If so, the permanent status talks are likely to be every bit as tortuous, inconclusive and bloody as their "interim" predecessor, and regardless of whether Likud's Binyamin Netanyahu or Labour's Shimon Peres is prime minister after the 9 May elections.

## EU pledges new regional role

RESPONDING to official and popular Arab frustration with what the Arab world sees as a US bias towards Israel, Italy's foreign minister and leader of the European Union's foreign policy group, troika, Susanna Agnelli, pledged that the EU will play a more active role in the peace process, reports Nevin Khalil.

Agnelli, leading an EU delegation on a two-day tour of Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, said in Beirut that the EU was "determined to contribute to the peace process", but that this must be done in co-operation with the US. Although praising the US role in trying to achieve peace in the Middle East, Agnelli said that Europeans had a better understanding of the region because of their proximity. "They [Americans] can come with all their power and try to make peace, but I still think that we know the region better," Agnelli said in Amman, after meeting with Jordanian Prime Minister Abd al-Karim Al-Kabriti.

After extensive talks with President Hosni Mubarak, Agnelli told reporters in Cairo that "our feeling is that the attitude of the world should be more balanced towards the region." Agnelli said that her understanding was that "the people of this region have a feeling of injustice" because not enough was done while Lebanon was being bombed by Israel. She added that this view will be conveyed during the EU's Mediterranean Forum meeting in Italy next week, and ways of moving towards a durable peace will be investigated.

The Italian foreign minister commented that "perhaps there has been too much bending towards Israel" on the part of the US. Egypt's Foreign Minister Amr Moussa said he would "not venture to describe the American role as unbalanced, but certainly there is an imbalance now in dealing with the Arab-Israeli equation." Moussa warned that any bias "would augur ill for the future stability in this region."

Mubarak and Agnelli also discussed the massive amount of military aid Israel is receiving. Moussa said the aid was creating "a dangerous and unbalanced situation, undermining the credibility of an atmosphere of peace." The Egyptian foreign minister added that Egypt would like the EU to play a more active role, by "introducing balance in the establishment of peace and the creation of a climate conducive to a just and lasting peace."

Agnelli shuttled between Beirut, Damascus and Jerusalem last month as part of an international drive to broker a truce in South Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah. During the 17-day onslaught, Israeli planes and artillery killed more than 200 Lebanese, mainly civilians, including 107 refugees at the Qana UN base south of Beirut.

Agnelli contrasted the international community's response to the Qana massacre with the outrage expressed over Hamas' suicide bombings in Israel. "We think that when something terrible happens, you have to consider all the countries the same," she said.



Palestinian youths shout curses as they hurl stones at Israeli soldiers during protests against the building of a security fence on Arab land in Qalqilya in the West Bank (photo: Reuters)

## Hanish: a Parisian settlement

Why should French mediation efforts between Yemen and Eritrea succeed when all others failed, wonders Gamal Nkrumah

Peace between Eritrea and Yemen appeared to be slipping through their fingers until France stepped in. Now French construction companies are hoping to line their pockets with the dividends of peace.

Cross-crossed by busy shipping lanes, the Hanish archipelago of some 200 square kilometres is potentially an excellent piece of real estate. The barren volcanic outcrop provides stark panoramic views with much potential for the development of tourism. French construction companies are keeping their fingers crossed, hoping that they will garner plum spoils when they build luxury holiday villages for Saudi and other Gulf Arab holidaymakers. Yemen, as with most other Arabian peninsula nations, is a decidedly dry country. In sear-like Eritrea, drink flows aplenty in the rapidly developing tourist haunts. The Eritreans, half of whom are Muslim, are not too particular about the modesty stipulations of the Islamic dress code. A million unemployed Eritrean ex-combatants, half of them female, cannot afford to pass a chance to work for French hoteliers and Saudi holidaymakers.

Yemen and Eritrea agreed to submit their dispute over a strategic Red Sea archipelago to international arbitration. The accord stipulates that the two neighbours refrain from using force and urges them to take their dispute to a panel of three judges from the International Court of Justice. The Yemeni ambassador to Egypt, Ahmed Mohamed Luqman, told *Al-Ahram Weekly*, "Yemen is cautiously optimistic and welcomes Eritrea's acceptance of the principle of international arbitration." Luqman

added that Yemen will wait to see whether Eritrea also accepts the result of international arbitration.

Crossed by busy shipping lanes, the Hanish archipelago of some 200 square kilometres is potentially an excellent piece of real estate. The barren volcanic outcrop provides stark panoramic views with much potential for the development of tourism. French construction companies are keeping their fingers crossed, hoping that they will garner plum spoils when they build luxury holiday villages for Saudi and other Gulf Arab holidaymakers. Yemen, as with most other Arabian peninsula nations, is a decidedly dry country. In sear-like Eritrea, drink flows aplenty in the rapidly developing tourist haunts. The Eritreans, half of whom are Muslim, are not too particular about the modesty stipulations of the Islamic dress code. A million unemployed Eritrean ex-combatants, half of them female, cannot afford to pass a chance to work for French hoteliers and Saudi holidaymakers.

As far back as March 1973, America's *Time* magazine reported that Israel occupied one of the Hanish islands, Jebel Zogar, to set up a base for patrols and a relay station. Israel denied *Time's* report, but Arab states remained sceptical about Israeli denials. This, after all, was the period when the states of the region were gearing up for the Arab-Israeli October war. Meanwhile another war was brewing —

"[Peace] is not finalised yet," warned the Eritrean chargé d'affaires in Cairo, Mohamed Ali Amru. "Eritrea refuses to vacate the Hanish archipelago until international arbitration settles the question of sovereignty over the islands."

War politics is a long-entrenched feature of regional rivalries in the Horn of Africa and the southern Arabian peninsula. War politics is embedded in the political structures that combine the inheritance of the liberation struggle for self-determination with the one-party ideologies. There was the war in Dhofar, Oman; the war between the former North and South Yemen; and the ongoing war in Somalia.

Before Eritrean independence in May 1993, Ethiopia claimed the Hanish archipelago on the basis of a 1938 British-Eritrean protocol permitting Italian officials on the archipelago to protect fishermen operating from Eritrean ports. Eritrea was an Italian colony and Britain controlled Aden. Before then, both Yemen and Eritrea had been Ottoman Turkish colonies.

The crux of the matter is that the ownership of the archipelago has never been established under international convention since the days when the disputed islands were an Ottoman possession.

Talaat Hamed, a spokesman of the Arab League in Cairo told the *Weekly*, "[The accord] underlines once again the need to use peaceful means to serve the interests of the brotherly peoples of Yemen and Eritrea." United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Ghali has been pressing the two protagonists to end the dispute and helping France set up this accord which Paris will countersign as a witness. France has invited Egypt and Ethiopia to sign the accord as witnesses as well.

A special French envoy, François Guitmann, has been shuttling between Yemen and Eritrea since 25 January. After meeting Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki in the Eritrean capital Asmara on 25 April, Guitmann talked to Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Saleh in Sanaa last Monday.

France is traditionally a major player in the region. It was the colonial power in

nearby Djibouti, which lies immediately to the south of Eritrea. France has a huge military presence in Djibouti, owning a naval and air base there. Djibouti is strategically situated next to busy shipping lanes along which giant oil tankers transport crude oil from the Arab Gulf states to European destinations.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Azur Moussa described the agreement reached through French mediation as an "important accomplishment". Egypt, in conjunction with Ethiopia, has been assisting France in its mediation efforts. "It serves the general interest and the movement towards a peaceful solution in the Yemen-Eritrea crisis," Moussa added.

Observers note that Yemen has been far more enthusiastic about the outcome of French mediation efforts than Eritrea. The question now is whether the conflict will cease to be mainly military and become a political dispute. The answer hinges on whether the West and the Gulf Arab states are willing to finance the development of the region.

# 'They cannot stop the idea'

The first two works in French philosopher Roger Garaudy's trilogy criticising religious fundamentalism stirred little response. The last of the trilogy, dealing with Zionism, opened a hornet's nest, however, and exposed the 83-year-old writer to a possible prison term. Amira Howeidy reviews the controversy and talks to Garaudy

France's Gayssot-Fabius Law, which was promulgated in 1990, stipulates that whosoever contests the existence of crimes against humanity which are recognised by France or international jurisdiction will be punished by imprisonment for a period ranging between one month and a year and/or fined. The law, however, had never been invoked until French philosopher Roger Garaudy, 83, brought out his latest work *The Founding Myths of Israeli Politics* last month. The book was banned immediately after its publication by Samizdat, an extreme right-wing publishing house which has previously printed anti-Semitic literature.

Originally a Protestant, Garaudy converted to Catholicism and then became a Marxist and a leading member of the French Communist Party. He abandoned Marxism and left the party when he converted to Islam 10 years ago.

*The Founding Myths of Israeli Politics* is the third part of a trilogy which presents a critique of fundamentalism in the three monotheistic religions. The first part, entitled *The Greatness and Decadence of Islam*, incensed Muslim clerics for stating that "Islamism is a disease of Islam". It was followed by *Towards a War of Religion*, which criticised Christian fundamentalism. In the third part of the trilogy, Garaudy lists and criticises a number of generally accepted concepts which he considers to be myths — Zionist anti-Semitism, justice in the post-World War II Nuremberg trials, the Holocaust and the Zionist slogan of "a land without a people for a people without a land". He goes on, in the book, to suggest that the powerful Israeli-Zionist lobbies in both the United States and France have perpetuated these myths through political machinations and capitalised on them.

*... and Garaudy tells his side of the story*

*In a telephone interview from his Paris home, Roger Garaudy spoke to Al-Ahram Weekly about his current position and the effect of the publication of his book *The Founding Myths of Israeli Politics* on his life. In an impassioned and sometimes angry tone, Garaudy defended his argument and rejected the accusation of anti-Semitism.*

*The following are excerpts from the interview:*

**What exactly is your legal position. Are you facing a jail sentence?**  
I have been charged, but I haven't been sentenced to prison yet. There will be a trial, however, but I don't know when.

**Will you explain the law under which you are being tried?**  
The law prohibits any questioning of the results of the Nuremberg trial, while the main chapter in my book criticises the trial. However, they consider that it is not possible to discuss the conclusions of the trial and that is why I have now been charged.

**Why have you decided only now to publish your book after two previous works criticising**

**fundamentalism in Islam and Christianity?**  
*The Founding Myths of Israeli Politics* is the third part of a trilogy about fundamentalism which I began several years ago.

**But why have you made it the last part of your trilogy?**

First of all, Judaism — which is a religion — is intentionally confused with Zionism, which is a policy — a tribal, colonial and nationalist policy. This policy has created disorder and chaos and committed real crimes against humanity. A recent example of this is the bombardment of an ambulance in South Lebanon carrying wounded women and children and then the shelling of the United Nations camp in Qana. Those crimes have gone too far and I think this is a good time to publish my work.

**How do you explain the growing campaign against you?**

I believe that the reason behind the growth of the campaign was to divert the attention of public opinion here from the attacks committed by the Israelis against Lebanon. For instance, the day they bombed the camp, the headline in the biggest paper in France was "The failings of Father Pierre". On the day when Israel bombed the ambulance, the head-

line was "Garaudy's affair", and so on.

When Peres — the orchestrator of the crime — visited France lately, the headlines were "The critics [the French Jewish-dominated society for fighting racism and anti-Semitism] excluded Father Pierre". All this was done to divert attention from the crimes being committed by Israel.

**It is believed that your old friendship with Father Pierre was the reason behind his support for you.**  
Father Pierre supported my views, not out of friendship, but because what I said is the truth. Father Pierre in France is a man who has always dedicated his life to serving good and humane causes.

He spent his whole life without a home and when I explained to him that in Lebanon there are 30,000 people without homes, he intervened. It's not only a question of confidence in me. He actually believes in what he is saying.

**How do you plead to the charge that you are anti-Semitic?**

I am anti-Zionist. Zionism is a tribal policy and is not related to Judaism, which is a religion. When I was in a concentration camp many years ago, I gave conferences about the prophets of Israel, and all my life, I have been inspired by the lessons of those

prophets. It also seems to me that fighting against Zionism is the best remedy for anti-Semitism, because what nourished it in the first place is precisely the policies of Zionist Israel.

**Does this mean that you are against the establishment of Israel?**

The establishment of the state of Israel was inspired by its spiritual Zionist father, [Theodor] Herzl, who was inspired by European nationalism and colonialism of the 19th century. Therefore, I do not accept the existence of Israel because it was created by force.

**How much does your marriage to a Palestinian sway your views on Israel and the Palestinians?**

This is not the point. I wrote books long before I knew personally such and such a Palestinian. When I wrote my book *Palestine: Land of Divine Messages*, I was not related to any Palestinians. This is a personal question and has nothing to do with my views on the Palestinians. It's a question of justice.

On the other hand, I admit that I sympathise with the Palestinians. They were destroyed and tortured by the Israelis. Israel is the invader of the people of Palestine, who had lived in this land for 4,000 years.

**Do you believe that Shimon Peres's recent visit**

**to France has influenced the campaign against you?**

Shimon Peres is a war criminal. He committed exactly what are defined as crimes against humanity. As for the effect of his recent visit to France, I don't think that he personally intervened in encouraging the campaign against me, but I am sure that those who were attacking me are agents of Peres and the state of Israel.

**Did you expect this to happen?**  
Yes, of course. This is not the first time. I am used to campaigns. When I wrote my book on Palestine, the bookshops that sold it were threatened to have their windows smashed.

**How has your life been after publishing the book?**

I received a number of death threats, one of which was during the transmission of a radio programme. But, on the other hand, this gave my book a lot of publicity. It was recently published in the United States, Lebanon, Italy, Germany, Russia and Turkey.

So they cannot stop the idea in the book. They can kill me, they can ban the book, but it will be met with denunciation from all over the world.



**"While Israel was shelling Lebanon, the French headlines were attacking Father Pierre"**

Additional reporting from Paris by Hosni Abdel-Rehim

## Papering over African cracks

Politicians in post-Mao Zedong China have almost ceased to talk about a foreign policy without giving economic matters careful consideration. Rapid Chinese economic growth has made it possible for the People's Republic of China to develop strong commercial links with Africa in the 1990s. "It is impossible to achieve international economic prosperity without the development of Africa," Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen declared in Beijing

on the eve of the ruling Chinese Communist Party chief and President Jiang Zemin's tour of Africa this week. Jiang, the head of the Chinese state, is scheduled to visit Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Namibia and Zimbabwe between 8 and 22 May.

Qian Qichen had a good point. Recently published World Bank figures show that Africa got less than one per cent — \$2 billion — of an all-time high \$231 billion of foreign investment in the developing world in 1995.

South East Asian countries got the lion's share.

Western aid to Africa declined by some 12 per cent in 1994. America's aid to the continent is to be slashed by some 30 per cent in 1996 and Britain's aid to Africa is to be reduced by five per cent in 1996-97. African economies suffered from capital flight and an unfavourable investment climate due in part to unstable political conditions. But Taiwan was among the few countries which stepped up aid to Africa precisely at the very moment that Africa's traditional Western donors decided to flee what they saw as the sinking ship of African economic malaise.

It may be too late to roll back the years, but we can still look forward to a brighter future in Africa. This is the message that Jiang Zemin wishes to convey during his tour of Africa. This is what Africans want to hear. The Chinese leadership understands that it is economic competitiveness and not political clout that will win them new markets in Africa. But both Africans and the Chinese realise that political clout can be used as a stimulus for trade.

In the not so distant past,

Mao's ideological vision of anti-imperialism exercised a powerful influence on the African political scene. Mao's theories of rural-focused development were less popular. In recent years, senior statesman Deng Xiaoping's own vision of economic deregulation has made an indelible mark on Africa. Foreign Minister Qian Qichen rightly pointed out that Africa needs long-term development assistance, not short-term emergency relief.

Beijing, adopting the well-tried Taiwanese strategy, has now set aside its old policy of providing grants to cash-strapped African countries and is now stepping up interest-bearing loans to African nations. Taiwan's annual trade with Africa now stands at an impressive \$25 billion. A number of African countries have been bowing to Taiwanese economic and political pressure to

establish full diplomatic relations with Taipei. The People's Republic is trying hard to catch up with its maverick province, and Jiang's tour of Africa is a step in the right direction. China is offering African countries aid and trade with no political strings attached — except perhaps that African states decline Taipei's advances.

The rising Taiwanese star in Africa risks arousing anew old political and ideological passions that have long been smothered elsewhere with the end of the Cold War. Trade and aid are used as political levers by both China and Taiwan. In the past few years, China has failed to match Taiwan's far more generous financial assistance to African nations. There are a number of African countries that have switched allegiances from Beijing to Taipei. Senegal, for instance, established full diplomatic relations with Taipei last January.

Be that as it may, Taiwanese economic clout is a long step away from inheriting the old political mantle of Beijing. Most African nations are still partial to Beijing. The centrepiece of the old commercial partnership between Africa and China was undoubtedly the TANZAM railway, which was completed in the 1970s and linked landlocked Zambia's resource-rich copper belt with the Tanzanian Indian Ocean port of Dar es Salaam.

Jiang's tour of Africa is an opportune moment for Africans to re-examine the nature of their relationship with China. The popular prejudices against China in the West sound uncannily similar to those levelled against African governments. Africans, like the Chinese, are accustomed to strong governments — usually of the one-party variety — which assure social stability. Both African governments and the Chinese have come under intense pressure and stigma from the West over human rights violations and abuses of power. Many of the African countries that are being visited by President Jiang Zemin — especially Kenya and Zimbabwe — share China's abhorrence of Western exhortations.

It is something of a futile exercise for the West to argue that China must not use its political weight commercially to further its geopolitical goals. Cut-price Chinese goods are flooding African markets. South Africa's imports from the People's Republic amounted to \$1.284 million in 1994. The respective figures from Taiwan were \$2.604 million. South Africa exported \$585 million worth of goods to China and \$1.817 million worth to Taiwan in 1994. Clearly, the People's Republic is no match for Taiwan. But China's star as the economic dynamo of the 21st century is fast rising.

However, as the relationship between Africa and China undergoes rapid and profound change, one paradox remains unresolved. South Africa, the continent's economic powerhouse, maintains full diplomatic relations with Taipei — and not Beijing. This diplomatic anachronism is a legacy of the apartheid years. South African President Nelson Mandela paid a state visit to Taiwan last year — he has never set foot in the People's Republic — and his foreign minister, Alfred Nzo, was in Taipei earlier this year. Nzo also visited Beijing just before he came to Cairo to sign the African Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaty. Nevertheless, there is a Chinese representative office in Johannesburg rendering full diplomatic functions and consular services," explained Antoinette Joubert, of the South African Embassy in Cairo. "The Chinese interest office is called the Chinese Cultural Centre in South Africa, and there is a similar South African Cultural Centre in Beijing. The Taiwanese, on the other hand, have a full-fledged diplomatic mission in Pretoria."

South Africa is not among the African countries to be visited by President Jiang Zemin. The African National Congress took the Moscow line, while Beijing supported the Pan-African Congress of Azania.

The South African Chinese community is some 100,000-strong. They are mainly from the Chinese mainland, but other Chinese of Hong Kong and Taiwanese extraction have moved into the country in the past few years. The first influx of ethnic Chinese came

Chinese President Jiang Zemin tours Africa this week, rekindling the old flames of friendship but abandoning grants in favour of interest-bearing loans, writes Gamal Nkrumah



in the early 1920s to work as labourers when South Africa's railway infrastructure was being built. Today, they are mainly traders and financiers. Most large South African cities have a thriving Chinatown.

Taiwan is a trading nation par excellence. Taiwanese exports and imports accounted for 74 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) in 1994. Tiny Taiwan ranked 12th in the league of the world's largest trading nations. It exported \$92.9 billion worth of goods last year. The comparable figure for China was \$121 billion. The 21 million Taiwanese had a GDP per capita of \$11,500 in 1994. Taiwan's per capita income is 20 times as high as the People's Republic. Last year, Taiwan's GDP stood at \$241 billion, while China, with some 1,300 million people, had a GDP of \$630 billion. But the Taiwanese have a lot of faith in China's rapidity of liberalising economy. Taiwanese investment in China stood at \$4.6 billion by the end of 1994.

What does all this mean for Africa? The ambassador of Niger in Cairo, Mamane Ouazou, whose country was the first to ditch Beijing in favour of Taipei three years ago, told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that Taiwan was a far more important trading partner and aid donor than the People's Republic. "Poor countries, like Niger, are denied the opportunity to have good relations with all countries. They are often unfairly forced to choose between two valuable friends," he noted. Niger's decision to recognise Taipei set a precedent in the 1990s among the impoverished Francophone countries of West Africa's Sahel belt.

The Malian ambassador to Egypt, Allaye Alphady Cisse, was adamant that despite the fact that Mali's neighbours — Senegal to the west and Niger to the east — had severed diplomatic ties with the People's Republic in favour of Taiwan, Mali would continue to have excellent working relations with Beijing. "The Chinese built an ultra-modern international conference centre in the Malian capital Bamako in 1995. Mali and China have numerous joint venture projects, especially in agriculture, sugar production, pharmaceutical products and textiles," Cisse told the *Weekly*.

The Chinese find such projects and they are built with Chinese technical expertise. Still, many African nations are beginning to tire of Chinese sports stadiums and other white elephants.

The Senegalese ambassador to Egypt, Hassan Bassirou Dion, was more forthcoming. "We recently decided to recognise the Republic of China [Taiwan]," he said. "We have extensive trade links with Taiwan. We still do business with Beijing. The Chinese have not yet evacuated their embassy in Dakar. But Beijing has notified us that it will do so in due course."

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## El-Fayed's calling

Is Mohamed El-Fayed, trying to be Britain's answer to America's Ross Perot? Abdallah Abdel-Salam reports from London

The British daily *The Independent* recently published in its front page a report stating that Mohamed El-Fayed, the Egyptian owner of London's most famous department store, Harrods, was secretly planning to establish a political party. The new party would aim, the report read, to reform the British constitutional system. Twenty-three million pounds sterling are said to have been earmarked by El-Fayed for candidates of the prospective Reform Party during the forthcoming parliamentary elections, due in the first half of next year.

A statement issued by El-Fayed's offices denied he had such plans and claimed that the *Independent* had been referring to a proposal under study by British constitution experts. Nevertheless, it is clear that El-Fayed has political ambitions which he is willing to submit for public discussion in Britain. The British political system, which was once impermeable to tycoons, is — like Italy and the United States — become more responsive to them. Sir James Goldsmith, the billionaire who recently set up the Referendum Party, is a good example of the phenomenon.

But how can someone who does not have British nationality establish a political party in Britain? Mansur Malek, a British lawyer who has specialised in matters relating to immigration and political asylum, explained: "Anyone who obtains full residence in Britain is entitled to vote and to exercise political rights including the right to establish political parties," he told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

El-Fayed enjoys full residence rights in Britain. Mohamed El-Fayed and his two brothers, Ali and Saleh, came under the spotlight of the British media in the early eighties. The Fayed brothers had a conflict with a businessman called Tim Roland over the purchase of the House of Fraser group, which consists of 59 stores in addition to Harrods. While the Fayed brothers won the deal, Roland, the owner of the weekly *Observer*,

launched defamatory campaigns against the brothers on the pages of his newspaper. The battle intensified in 1989, to the extent that *The Observer* published a special issue in March of that year devoted entirely to the discussion of the Fayed case.

The Fayed enjoyed the unquestionable support of the Conservatives under the leadership of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The brothers gave generous contributions to the party, a fact which led Tim Roland to accuse the Tories of compromising the requirements for the conclusion of the Harrods deal.

However, the Fayed's relationship with the Tories deteriorated after Thatcher and a number of confrontations with top party members took place. Mohamed is still struggling to obtain British nationality, though he has lived in England for 30 years.

Dr Sofya Safwat, a Sudanese legal consultant practising in London, explained that when an application for nationality is refused, no reasons are normally given. From the legal standpoint, nationality is a gift not a right and, therefore, no authority can compel the Home Office to grant British nationality to a person who was not born in Britain.

According to Safwat, information leaked from the Immigration Office attributes the refusal to grant nationality to El-Fayed to the confrontations which have taken place between him and the Tory government during the past two years. El-Fayed himself does not deny that there are conflicts, and from time to time he attacks the government. In an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*, he charged that 75 per cent of the Conservative members of the House of Commons were corrupt, and that the house had become a "takeaway" facility: the one who pays gets what he wants rapidly.

Michael Cole, the Fayed's spokesman, told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that divulgences of names of corrupt members of parliament had turned the Tory government against Mohamed. The Conservatives

have not forgotten that El-Fayed forced former Trade Minister Neil Hamilton to resign when the businessman produced evidence to show that Hamilton compromised his government position by staying at the El-Fayed-owned Ritz Hotel in Paris free of charge.

Mohamed El-Fayed's political agenda, Cole told *the Weekly*, was merely to establish an independent trust to explore and study ideas for constitutional reforms in Britain. El-Fayed would not play any role in the new organisation except financially.

El-Fayed, in his reply to the *Independent*'s claims, admitted that he was personally concerned with promoting certain political ideas, including a new Bill of Rights, legislation for the freedom of information and the abolition of the House of Lords and the establishment of an elected council in its place.

Professor Peter Walters, a lecturer in political science at Liverpool University, told the *Weekly*, "It seems amazing that during the past few months, the British political field has witnessed the rise of James Goldsmith, who established the Referendum Party to urge the British to reject uniting under a European flag and to propagate the slogan 'Yes for London, no for Brussels', and El-Fayed, who is proposing ideas to reform the constitution." A trend has emerged for businessmen to seek a direct role in politics in Britain, and Walters emphasised the novelty of this phenomenon. While there were cases in the past of businessmen attempting to influence the political establishment, he said, they were mostly assimilated, particularly by the Tories.

El-Fayed is no stranger to political ambitions. He has tried on several occasions to buy the *Today* and *The Observer* newspapers, as well as a radio station, but each time the government exerted pressure on the owners to prevent media organs coming under his influence. El-Fayed does, however, own the satirical magazine *Punch*.



London-based tycoon Mohamed El-Fayed

## Just a disaster for the Tories

The British Conservative Party last week experienced its second worst local election defeat ever. Faiza Rady looks at how the newly rejuvenated Labour Party is winning over former Tory voters in England

In the wake of Conservative Party's loss of 573 city council seats in British local government elections on 3 May, the tabloid press screamed Prime Minister John Major's downfall in their banner headlines. "Poll-Ax" proclaimed the *Daily Express*, while the *Sun* triumphantly chirped, "You're Gone John". Gone, in fact, were half the seats the Conservatives were defending, as well as highly symbolic Tory strongholds like traditionally Thatcherite Basildon and Peterborough, home of party chairman Brian Mawhinney.

"Conservatives were also stung by a wipe-out on 30 councils, leaving a total of 50 — one in nine — without any Tory councillors. Big cities, including Oxford, Manchester and Newcastle, as well as southern new towns such as Slough and Harlow, are now 'Tory-free' zones," wrote the *Guardian*.

Ivor Crewe, vice-chancellor of Essex University, somewhat mitigated the tabloids' expression of glee. "They are not as disappointed as they should be," he said. "They were expecting catastrophe, and all they got was disaster." Analysis had shown that the Conservatives' results on 3 May would translate into 28 per cent of the vote in a general election — two points up on last year's projection.

Addressing the "disaster", John Major — like Crewe — looked on the bright side: the vote was not the worst, only the second worst Conservative defeat in local elec-

tion history. The prime minister summarily downplayed Labour's gains at the polls by dismissing the political relevance of local elections when compared to general elections. "People have, for as far back as you can go since the second world war, chosen by-elections and local council elections to protest against the government of the day," he explained. The low voter turnout of 30 per cent on 3 May, compared with 46 per cent in the 1991 general election and 78 per cent in the last general election, seemed to prove Major's point. Referring to the high rate of voter abstention, he said: "There are millions and millions of people who will go out and vote Conservative at the next general election who chose not to do so yesterday." He further deflated the Labour victory by pointing out that its share of the vote had actually declined from 21 per cent in 16 per cent this year.

Labour called Major's surface confidence "arrogant in the face of disaster", and celebrated their 464 seat gains and control of 210 councils. Proclaiming a ground-breaking victory, analysts stressed that election issues had gone beyond local politics. "These elections are important because in very few constituencies are local issues at stake,"

wrote Anne Apfelbaum, a columnist for the *Evening Standard*. "In almost every one of the main issues the prime minister, the party and the government" Labour leader Tony Blair described the results as "excellent for new Labour and spectacularly bad for the Conservatives", who were able only to "scratch for the odd piece of statistical comfort". Labour cadres were especially fired up as many traditionally Tory constituencies switched to Labour, leading Blair to conclude that "steadily and surely we are building the bond of trust with the people".

Having lost all major legislative elections to the Tories since 1979, Labour has good reason to celebrate this victory. Many analysts believe that the party's marginalisation was due to a gradual and consistent erosion of its union-based blue-collar constituency. During the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher successfully engaged in large-scale union-busting, while relocating entire sectors of Britain's manufacturing industry to Southern countries — which are endowed with a cheap and unprotected workforce.

The Labour Party lost its most important base when the industrial and building sectors fired 40 per cent of their workers; indeed, by the end of the '80s, these two sectors

employed only 25 per cent of the entire workforce. Confronted with a new generation of mostly white-collar service workers with a different culture and class background, the party no longer spoke the language of its constituency. At this point, Labour faced a real dilemma: aligning its position too closely with the prevailing neo-liberal ideology would further erode their traditional blue-collar constituency, but the conventional socialist discourse alienated the "new" working class. "The attempt to juggle these tendencies resulted in the most confused and muddled definition of the party's political perspective and platform," wrote economist François Poirier.

Hence Labour restructured itself, redefining its basic tenets. As early as 1985, the party admitted that most trade-union bargaining rights had been irreversibly lost to Thatcherism. Between '87 and '90, leading cadres accepted the privatisation of major state enterprises by scrapping the nationalisation clause from their platform. But it was really with Tony Blair's nomination to the leadership in 1994 that the revisionist trend accelerated. Blair sought to project the "new Labour" image by discarding the old leftist principles.

Thus the economic definition of socialism as the "collective ownership of the means of production and exchange" and the class reference to the workers' movement, as represented in the party's affiliation with the trade unions, were challenged. In the April '95 Labour Party conference, members overwhelmingly voted to reduce the economic definition of socialism to the loose objective of seeking "social justice", while the executive party commission limited trade-union representation to the party conference. Moreover, Tony Blair's revamped "neo-Labour" Party carefully avoided any direct references to social inequalities in its frantic efforts to capture the middle-class vote. Sociologist Marc Lazar explains that the party finally reached mainstream voters by adopting a kind of populist Christian socialist strategy with strong Conservative overtones. By acknowledging that the welfare state had finally become redundant and focusing on individual responsibility, the Labour discourse of the '90s in effect merged with the dominant neo-liberal position.

But how does this "in" Labour speak address Britain's increasingly disenfranchised working class? While it is true that upward mobility for young professionals is still the norm, economist John Grieve

Smith has documented how high unemployment levels and "flexible" employment — a euphemism for low-paid, part-time temporary jobs — have caused the number of poor people to triple since the early '80s. Life expectancy for the poor is now eight years below the national average. And between '75 and '92, the purchasing power of the lowest income bracket, which includes 10 per cent of all male workers, decreased in real terms. Moreover, social service budget slashes, which principally affect the working class, coupled with Conservative fiscal policies, increased absolute poverty. While unemployment compensation was adjusted to family size and needs before Thatcherism, the reformed Conservative package allocates a fixed compensation rate, regardless of the number of family dependents.

The dire material conditions of the British poor have induced Oxford — an organisation which assists impoverished Third World nations — to start an anti-poverty programme in Britain last year. To justify his decision, Oxford's director explained that with 14 million people with incomes below the national average and one out of four families requiring some form of welfare assistance, Britain needed to follow the survival strategy of Southern communities. Whether Tony Blair's reconstructed Labour Party can address this crisis at the political level remains an open question.

## May Day roundup

### North

PARIS: Waving banners against immigration, European integration and President Jacques Chirac, about 12,000 far-right supporters marched through the French capital on the traditional labour day. With unemployment pushing 12 per cent, weak unions and modernisation threatening many jobs, polls indicate growing disaffection with France's traditional parties.

Meanwhile, the popularity of the extreme right-wing National Front is on the rise. The marchers consisted mostly of middle-aged and elderly people, particularly war veterans and people from depressed rural areas. Demonstrators called on the government to expel immigrants from France.

MOSCOW: Election politics dominated May Day marches, with Russian President Boris Yeltsin and communist rival, Gennady Zyuganov, each rallying about 10,000 supporters six weeks before the presidential polls.

Yeltsin urged independent trade unionists carrying blue flags to "help citizens to take the right decisions" in the 16 June elections, while less than two kilometres away Zyuganov told his supporters, amid a sea of red Soviet flags and portraits of Lenin, that any postponement of the polls would trigger civil war.

Many state workers and pensioners have not been paid for months. The communist supporters include many angered by the government's failure to pay salaries and benefits and to stop production plummeting.

Several other ex-Soviet republics largely abandoned May Day festivities, but thousands turned out at rallies in Armenia, Belarus and Ukraine.

BERLIN: Workers demonstrated against the government's proposed overhaul of the welfare state, protesting most strongly at plans to reduce sick pay. The head of the German Federation of Trade Unions told 20,000 demonstrators at Berlin's City Hall that if the government and industry were looking for a fight "they will find our clenched fists".

In Berlin, leftists and neo-Nazis organised their own May Day demonstrations. Protesters threw stones and bottles at police during a demonstration of some 9,000 leftist in eastern Berlin. Clashes left 48 policeman injured in the city.

TOKYO: Some 2.1 million Japanese workers joined rallies nationwide to declare war on record unemployment, as the country battles to lift itself out of its worst post-war recession.

Some 1,100 May Day events took place across Japan, but most were held in a festive mood with participants attracted more by rock 'n' roll concerts and comedy shows than worker solidarity.

### South

NEW DELHI: Trade union officials in the country's communist citadel of Calcutta said workers' processions would not be held, in line with an Election Commission ban. Seventeen states and federal territories voted in the second round of India's national elections.

Celebrations normally draw tens of thousands to the city's Chawringee area, amid fiery speeches and colourful portraits of Marx and Lenin.

BEIJING: There were no top-level celebrations, but 100,000 Chinese workers, farmers, soldiers, students and children from all parts of the country flocked to Tiananmen Square, to watch the ceremony of raising the national flag.

SEOUL: Some 15,000 trade union militants staged a May Day march urging the South Korean government to ease restrictions on organised labour and to let unions take up political activities.

SWAZILAND: More than 40,000 Swazi workers turned up at a rally in an industrial town in the east of the country to celebrate the tiny southern African kingdom's first official May Day holiday.

Swazi King Mswati III, who rules by decree, reluctantly agreed to make May Day a public holiday. It is, however, an unpaid one, much to the anger of workers who have been demanding that King Mswati reinstate the constitution suspended by his father King Sobhuza in 1973.

MEXICO CITY: For the second year running, the government and unions opted not to hold traditional May Day parades due to economic constraints. But thousands of workers independently took to the streets in peaceful marches to demonstrate against government economic policies.

DAR ES SALAAM: Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa raised the minimum wage from \$20 to \$30 a month and ordered a general pay rise for all workers in the country.

Compiled by Heba Samir



## Italians reject the right

Italy has just voted in a left-of-centre government for the first time in 50 years. Sayed Awad analyses the election results

These are exciting, if somewhat uncertain, times for Italy as it holds the presidency of the European Union. The 35th government in Italy's post-World War II history promises to be the most left-wing in Italy's contemporary history. The upper and lower houses of the Italian parliament are now both controlled by the Olive Tree coalition — an unprecedented victory for Italy's left. Romano Prodi, head of a centrist party which forms part of the coalition, has been designated prime minister by President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro this month.

The Olive Tree won 319 of the 630 seats in the lower house of parliament, or Chamber of Deputies, and 167 of the 315 seats in the upper house, or Senate. Umberto Bossi's Northern League, which wants autonomy for the prosperous northern regions of Italy, secured 59 seats in the chamber and 27 seats in the senate, while the right-of-centre Freedom Alliance's tally was 246 and 117.

Massimo D'Alema, leader of the Olive Tree's biggest branch, the Democratic Party of the Left, obtained fewer votes than Enrico Berlinguer, veteran leader of the former Italian Communist Party, though he

was able to form a coalition government with other left-wing parties — afeat that forever eluded Berlinguer. The Democratic Party of the Left is the largest spin-off from the now defunct Italian Communist Party.

The Democratic Party of the Left still has the hammer and sickle on its emblem, but it adopted a watered-down version of Marxism in the aftermath of the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The party modelled itself on the British Labour Party and lies a fair distance to the right of the hardline Communist Refoundation, which gave the Olive Tree an overall majority by adding its votes to the coalition. The Communist Refoundation, another offshoot of the former Communist Party, wants to reintroduce the *scala mobile* system, which links pay rises to inflation.

Communism is not dead in Italy, but neither is capitalism or fascism for that matter. The two biggest personalities in the Freedom Alliance are Silvio Berlusconi, its leader, and Gianfranco Fini. Leader of the neo-fascist National Alliance, Fini, who was predicted to collect a large share of the vote than he did, was one of the biggest losers in the elections. Media tycoon Berlusconi, the leader of the Forza Italia Party

and a former prime minister, performed badly as well. He will be spending the next few months — maybe years — in and out of court on corruption charges such as that of bribing tax inspectors.

Outgoing Prime Minister Lamberto Dini and his new Italian Renewal party — another Olive Tree member — got a puny 4.3 per cent of the vote. Dini's major shortcoming was that he failed to give Italian voters a solid government. His coalition was shaky and important decisions could not be taken.

Can Prodi now provide the long awaited answer to Italy's political conundrum? Prodi, widely considered to be economically sophisticated and fiscally responsible, has many difficult tasks to accomplish in the next few months. Italy's unemployment rate stands at 13 per cent. Italy's public debt amounts to 125 per cent of its gross national product. But the Mediterranean country still has a standard of living higher than Britain's, a population bigger than France's and an economy that is still one of the world's most dynamic.

Edited by Gamal Nkrumah



## Fait accompli?

With less than three weeks to go until the elections, Peres has a lot on his mind. Aside from the fact that he faces strong opposition from the Likud Party, which is reeling in votes with the promise of continuing the policy of establishing settlements, he was recently targeted in a UN report on the Qana massacre.

In response to charges lodged in the report that Israel was made aware of the presence of Lebanese civilians in the UN compound, Peres has found it effective to blame the UN for allegedly not having informed him of the presence of refugees. But what of the fact that he had no business bombing a UN compound in the first place, whether or not Hezbollah guerrillas were hiding out there?

Given Israel's repeated assertion that its security interests preclude all else, the answer obviously is that this issue was inconsequential, as perhaps were the lives of over 100 Lebanese civilians.

The same can be said about the ongoing final status negotiations. When presented in February with an agreed summary of the issues to be discussed during the settlement talks, Peres rejected them outright. "Who says there must be a Palestinian state?" he asked in a recent interview. The Palestinians would be the first to come to mind, with Israeli negotiators in Taba coming in at a close second.

They are singing a different song from Peres', but then again, they are not campaigning. Ron Pundak, a senior Peres aide who is in charge of the final status talks on Jerusalem, recently said, "In three years, if all goes well, a Palestinian state will emerge... and why not? Jerusalem not be its capital?" Apparently, Pundak and his entourage are willing to tackle this issue, but is Peres?

The answer would probably lean more towards the affirmative than not. However, any clear, positive signs are painfully absent from the comments he has made in several recent interviews. This may simply be a defense mechanism or publicity ploy while on the campaign trail, but when it comes to a ticklish issue such as Palestinian sovereignty and Arab-Israeli peace process, it is a dangerous gambit. What Palestinian would want to bet on a future shrouded in a possible maybe?

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# The desert within

In the 1950s, pan-Arabism began to acquire Manichean overtones, writes **Lutfi El-Kholi**. Arab nationalists became entrenched in an all-out battle of good against evil. Geography and history have conspired against the formation of a unified Arab nation: what are the alternatives?

An attempt to read objectively the current state of the Arab world brings to light three essential aspects. The first, discussed in a previous article, related to the spirit of pan-Arab unity and the drive to unification. This spirit was, in thought, feeling and action, more profound and more dynamic during the period of colonial rule, despite its divisive tyranny, than during the entire post-independence period that witnessed the creation of the Arab League. For nearly fifty years now, the Arab world has been destabilized by the incapacity to organise collective action and to take the initiative in responding to the problems of the Arab community, both at home and abroad. In short, a prevalent weakness has developed, and appears to have acquired all the symptoms of chronic disease.

The second aspect which emerges from this reading, and which may go some way towards explaining the organic causes of the weakness, relates to topography. Topography has posed, and continues to pose, an insurmountable physical and psychological obstacle, not only to pan-Arab unity, but to effective and long-lasting interaction between the various Arab parties in a manner that both promotes joint interests and fosters a communal vision and a collective will.

In other words, the fact that 85 to 90 per cent of the total land surface of the Arab world is desert impedes uninterrupted social, economic and cultural interaction. The geography of the Arab world does not form a continuum from the west (the Maghreb) to the east (the Mashreq); instead, the Arab countries, which supposedly embody the communal will, are scattered oases, each an island unto itself, in a vast expanse of desert. From pre-Islamic times to the post-independence era, pan-Arabism as an ideology, as cultural dynamism and as political action, has repeatedly come up against the silent, barren expanses of sand which enclose Arab countries within their isolated shells.

In his recent work, *Arab Politics and the Implications of the Nation-State*, the well-known Bahraini scholar Dr Mohamed Jaber Al-Ansari, writes: "The lifeless desert spaces have prevented the emergence in the Arab world of an organic communal fabric with a single, integrated cycle of interaction that would constitute the synthetic force of society in a single, permanent and self-perpetuating Arab nation, from the distant past to the present day. The intervening desert, with its inherent spirit of alienation and estrangement, was the natural environment in which the distant and diverse tribal, sectarian and regional disparities evolved, over time, into distinct (socio-political) entities."

This is remarkably ironic. The Arab world occupies a uniquely strategic corner of the globe. It is, one might say, at the heart of the world, spanning Africa and Asia, facing Europe across the Mediterranean and overlooking the Americas via the Atlantic. Yet the Arabs have rarely been able to turn this incomparable strategic advantage to their benefit, particularly during the period that followed national independence and the creation of the Arab League. This applies as much to political and security matters (the Arab-Israeli struggle) as it does to the pursuit of economic interests (as a dominant influence at the crossroads of international economic and commercial relations).

The reason? For generations before the current revolution in communications technology, the arid topography of this region has separated the centres of civilization within it, preventing mutual influence and the exchange of expertise, and given rise to profound, and sometimes antagonistic, regional political, economic and cultural disparities. Simultaneously, it generated varying degrees of a cultural schizophrenia which set Bedouin tribalism against urban modernity.

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## Close up

Salama A. Salama

## The show goes on

The peace process is the longest running show in town. The theatre just never closes. No one takes a holiday, the actors never go on strike, never take a break. They do not fall ill or die though in some cases they get killed. What is unique, though, in this ongoing drama is that the scripts constantly mutate. They move in different, unexpected directions. Nor is it audience approval that is being sought. At times it seems that it is irrelevant whether those in the auditorium applaud or throw bricks.

The plot, in its current phase, appears lack purpose. It has run into trouble, and the head-director appears too much preoccupied with his own electoral problems to impose any vision on the proceedings. Suddenly, the people of the Middle East find Washington playing a supporting role to Israel, improving on the agreed text until it is unrecognisable, and calling for new actors to participate in an increasingly unconvincing peace process.

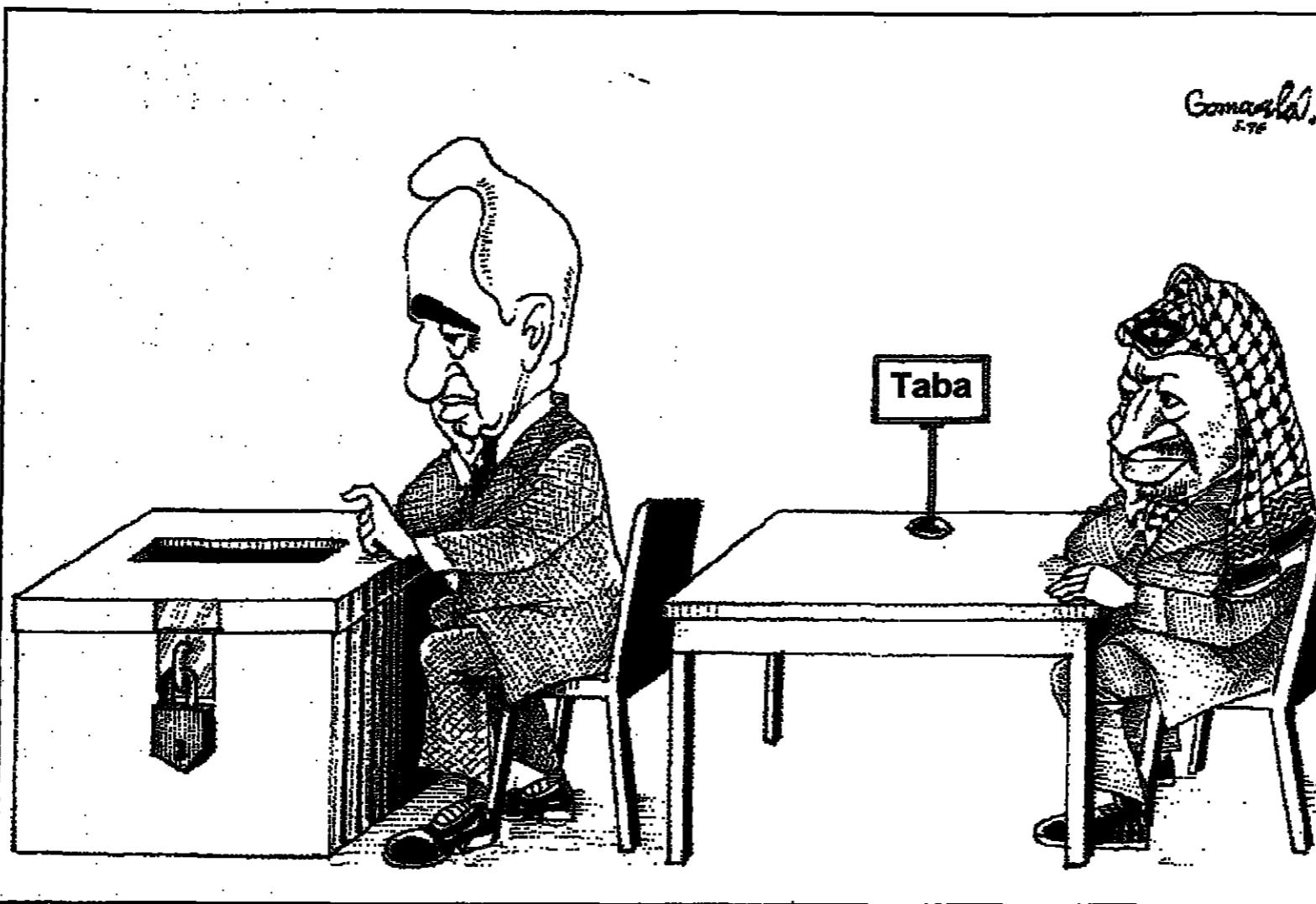
Frustrations no longer focus on a crippled peace process, on the trail of broken Israeli promises, for now the text has been splattered with blood. The civilian population of Lebanon now vie with the hungry residents of Gaza and the West Bank in the victim stakes. And American bias towards Israel has reached such proportions as to render the US incapable of effecting the peace process in a positive way.

Arabs have known for some time that in a presidential election year US policy is invariably paralysed. But now we witness a new twist to the plot, the novel feature being that for the first time ever an American president is acting as campaign manager of an Israeli prime minister, with the latter returning the favour. Reinforcing the main plot is a new sub-plot, which in the US administration showers Israel with military aid in complete contradiction to efforts to bring about peace in the region.

The European Union too, has a minor role in the twists and turns of this toruously unfolding soap opera. Unfortunately this role has been reduced to that of the ingene. Nor does the false naïveté shown by the European troika during its visits to Egypt and other regional states lead one to believe that it will ever be able to carve out a bigger role.

The impotence of Europe in dealing with the Balkan crisis had a very negative effect on its credibility in our region. But perhaps the most sinister plot line that might unfold in the region is lacking in novelty after all. Certainly nothing would create a heightening of tension more than a good old-fashioned arms race, which is, after all, the most likely result of the American departure from its avowed aims of arms control. The American secretary of state for foreign affairs, Warren Christopher, has cast doubts on Syrian intentions. Israel, it seems, is returning to character, increasingly depending on brute force as the most convincing guarantor of its own security.

The Israelis, it seems, are intent on returning to their old script. Should this really happen, then no one can be surprised if the show comes to an end. The audience in the region has seen it all before. And maybe the theatre will, in the end, have to close — be blacked out is the theatrical expression. The show, after all, cannot go on for ever.



## A question of time

The Arabs need a new Ibn Khaldun, writes Hassan Hanafi. Without a new awareness of history we will continue to float in ahistorical limbo, adrift on the seas of the past

Historical consciousness is the basis of political consciousness. The lack of a historical consciousness rends policies asunder and strains national unity to the point that "hostile brothers" — the fundamentalists and secularists in Algeria are a case in point — slaughter each other. Fundamentalists play the part of past generations in their defence of religion and identity, while secularists seek to represent future generations in defence of modernism. The question we must ask both groups is: which historical stage are we living in now? What is the contribution of the present generations? What is the nature of the present, which can neither be made into the past (as the fundamentalists would have it) nor launched into the future (as the secularists would do)?

Hegemony over the present is not simply a question of obtaining political power, the aspirations of the regimes and the opposition notwithstanding. Rather, it is the ability to grasp the nature of the present historical conjuncture. In the case of Arab society, the present means the shift from one stage to the next, from the old to the new, or from tradition to modernity, without renouncing one or the other, thereby preserving authenticity while entering the modern world, achieving change through continuity with the past and safeguarding the Arab-Islamic identity throughout history.

Arab thinkers began to raise the issue of history during the nineteenth century Arab renaissance. The liberal school undertook the search for history. Al-Tahawi found it in pre-Islamic Arab history, in the memoirs of the Hijazi dweller, or in Western history, namely the history of Charles X or the history of the French monarchy. But he kept looking for an absolute model of Arab revival, which he finally found in the philosophy of enlightenment: freedom, consultation (*shura*), political pluralism, constitution, parliament, limited monarchy, and education. Kheireddin Al-Touzi reached the same conclusion; but never was the question raised as to why the idea of history as historical consciousness was absent from Arab thought. Liberalism remained a dream, a remote hope aborted soon after the eruption of the modern Arab revolutionary movements. The struggle for the defence of freedom, democracy, pluralism and human rights continues to this day, but without an examination of the root causes within Arab history which prevent Arab society from achieving freedom.

Religious reform movements attempted to create historical consciousness. Al-Afghani's philosophy of history, for instance, is based on moral values such as courtesy, sincerity and honour, as if the historical process consisted of individual and group ethics. In the final section of "The Message of Monotheism", Mohamed Abdub contributed an analysis of historical consciousness to theology: the spread of Islam, the nation-state is also the offspring of

history, a reaction to the caliphate's failure to unify the nation within a pluralist context and its persecution of nationalist movements — Arab, Armenian, etc. — which it viewed as a threat to the unity of the state. This was the starting point for Sati' Al-Husari: pan-Arabism evolved with the eruption of the anti-colonialist movement. This concept of pan-Arabism was most clearly represented by the Arab Socialist Baath Party. It reached its climax with Nasserism, and so became "Arab nationalism", advocating liberty, socialism and unity. These values were the backbone of Arab revolutions and modern unification projects, especially the merger between Syria and Egypt.

The Islamic nation (*ummah*), as interpreted by Al-Afghani and Islamist movements at present, holds fast to history and the political heritage until the Ottoman era. It stresses legitimacy and the unity of the *ummah* which transcends national geography and ethnicity, and is based on the unity of faith and vision. Within this perspective, the *ummah* has become an ahistorical absolute, which pits the Islamist movement against the concept of the nation and Arab nationality.

Faced with these options, which are very real dimensions of historical consciousness, vision has been blinded, goals have clashed, and political forces have struggled to defeat each other. All this occurred in the absence of thorough analysis of historical consciousness or its overlapping conceptual "circles". (The Nasserist-Islamist discourse which encompassed the three circles of identity — Egyptian, Arab and Islamic — is an exception to this rule.)

Despite these contemporary attempts to formulate a sense of historical consciousness, this consciousness has not been realised in time and space — as conjecture. At present it groans under "absolutes" and is shattered by political ideologies. The theoretical consciousness of history, i.e. the contemplation of history, is totally absent. Mohamed Ali refused to read a history book offered to him by son Ibrahim after he had conquered the Levant, because he was the maker of history. This might be the reason for the absence of historical research during ancient times: our ancestors shaped history from the early conquests until the fall of Spain. Ibn Khaldun wrote the history of this period prior to the second wave of conquests of the East starting with Mohamed Al-Fath (the Conqueror) and the Ottoman state. Al-Sakhawi also discussed this era in *Al-I'an Bi'l-Tawhid Liman Dhamma Al-Tarikh* ("Reprobation to

Those Who Dispraise History"), in defence of history and historians. He relied on personal accounts, however, without focusing on the progress of history as historical consciousness.

The major reason for the absence of historical consciousness can be attributed to a lack of "roots" — the perception of history as the evolution of the cultural legacy. For Arab historians, history was confined merely to a description of events without reference to the progression of historical consciousness. They told the story of generations over time and did not focus on historical accumulation across generations, which might have led to the development of historical consciousness.

One can glimpse traces of a theory of historical evolution in early Islamic studies, but these failed to contribute to any awareness of historical evolution. For instance, in theology, history represented a decline from the time of the Prophet to the caliphate to the tyrant king, from the ideal to the best of the worst, from the redeemed group to the splitter, from unity to fragmentation and disbandment and from absolute justice to the whim of the ruler. Hence the best epoch is that of the prophet and the four rightly guided caliphs. In contrast to this view of history as a process of decline, we find the concept of the *mahdi* (the guided one) or the renovator, who was awaited at the beginning of each century. The concept of the *mahdi* who would fill the earth with justice and eliminate the reigning oppression explains the potent role played by heroism and leadership in our modern political history.

In Sufism, the perception of history as an ascent emerged in the symbol of the Prophet's miraculous night journey to Paradise. Sufi transcendentalism begins with repentence and progresses to *fana*, the merging of the individual soul with the absolute. Since it is impossible to save the world or to analyse concrete facts, one should rely on imagination; it is always possible to resort to inner contemplation when it is difficult to grasp things through reason.

In philosophy, history was portrayed as the history of peoples, civilisations, the great deeds of the Arabs, the Turks, the Persians and the Indians, and comparisons between the respective accomplishments of these civilisations. Ibn Khaldun undertook a similar project in his theory of the role of Arabs and Berbers in the historical process, which confused history and the theory of civilisational formation. History, nevertheless, is not a major concern of philosophy.

In jurisprudence, history consisted of tenets held by the ancestors. It was eliminated from the methodology of the jurists, and only the original divine texts were preserved as the source of legislation. Then individual interpretation or *jihad* emerged as a source of legislation; hence, the four sources of religious interpretation were the Qur'an, the *sunnah* (the example set by the Prophet's words and deeds), *ijmā'* or consensus and *qiyas* or interpretation through analogy with similar cases. The conclusions arrived at by our ancestors, however, do not necessarily entail the commitment of following generations to the same principles and ideas. Yet historical consciousness retained its legalist, textual and deductive character without introducing the historical accumulation necessary to develop historical consciousness.

The biographies of prophets and doomsday accounts could have provided the roots of historical consciousness and an anticipation of its progress. They were mostly fantastical, however, and praised the role of prophets in the past instead of stressing their contribution to the future. Historical consciousness is realised as reason and human will with the culmination of revelation as represented by Mohamed, the Seal of the Prophets. The doomsday accounts were pervaded with a desire for future salvation. As such, their sense of history was governed by an awareness of past and future, a vision from which the present was absent.

Ibn Khaldun was the only scholar who attempted to develop a historical consciousness of the first seven centuries of the Islamic state. He theorised the causes of rise and collapse, and formulated a law of evolution: from Bedouin society to urban civilisation, then from civilisation back to tribal life. He also analysed the Arabs' ability to build civilisation, and posited *asabiyyah* or group solidarity as the condition for the development of societies. He discussed the situation of the Franks in the north and criticised the errors of other historians. Seven hundred years after his death, the Arabs need a new Ibn Khaldun to develop a new sense of historical consciousness. He would suggest new theories of history, review the Arab situation, reshape and develop the sciences, continue his description of the peoples of the north, identify the relationship between self and other, and answer Shakib Arslan's question: "Why did the Muslim remain stagnant while others progressed?"

Historical consciousness situates the nation within history, between the past and the future, between the self and the other. Without historical consciousness, political consciousness would collapse. In the absence of the historical dimension, it is difficult for the Arabs to answer the question: Which era are we living in?

## To The Editor

## Leap of faith

Sir — I was deeply saddened to hear the news of the shooting at Hotel Europa last month. Since 1986, along with Egyptians, I have experienced the glories and declines of the tourism industry in Egypt and have been severely affected from a business perspective.

During the past 10 years, I have asked myself the same question over and over again: Why does this magical country, filled with kind, gentle people and some of the most magnificent sights in the world, continue to have to suffer like this?

A major portion of the answer comes in the form of a pattern which continues to unfold just as the glories and declines of tourism do: a decline in the industry is always preceded by an event that shakes travellers' confidence in security in Egypt. As a result, everyone in the tourism industry does what is humanly possible to bring the business back. The moment that tourists return, the industry raises prices and backs off of security.

An excellent example of this is what I experienced while I was in Egypt in February and March. Once again when tourists had returned and spirits were high, heightened security was lifted and exorbitant price increases were announced. For example, the government lifted the ban on sailing in the upper part of the Nile.

Why? There are outstanding products to sell all over Egypt in great abundance. Why would the industry back off on security in an area where there is potential for trouble? And the price increase resulted in a \$1,000 plus increase to my consumer for future tours. And now, as we are faced with yet another shut-

down of tourism, I would like to pose a few questions to those responsible for tourism in Egypt:

Why is security relaxed the moment tourism returns? Why didn't you continue to be committed to a high level of intense security and avoid the continual repetition of the glories and declines of the industry, so that you reach a level of consistency in inbound tourism. And why, in addition, don't you challenge the security issues you face with creative solutions? One example of a creative solution would be to limit traffic in dense tourist areas to registered tourist buses only.

Why do you feel that when tourism returns you can immediately recoup all your financial losses? I can't. Due to the \$1,000 increase mentioned earlier, I was not able to raise my prices one cent. I, too, have an investment in Egypt.

As I write amidst the current climate spearheaded by last month's disaster, I am, once again, faced with losses of significant proportion relating to future tours to Egypt.

As I evaluate the situation, it does not look good. I feel that I must solicit official support and ask what incentives there are for me and my clients to come to Egypt. How can we entice tourists to take the leap of faith when security is shaky?

I would like to know what those in the industry are willing to do in terms of tourist discounts. I would also like to know how they are willing to help me and what specific security policies you are changing to offset last month's tragedy?

Temma Ecker  
president  
Journeys of the Mind  
Illinois, USA

## Reflections By Hani Shukralah

## No more than numbers

Is one supposed to feel any less horrified at the kind of monsters that certain political ideologies make of people when the numbers of their victims are less than presumed or claimed? Would the Israeli massacre of impoverished villagers in the Qana camp have been any less heinous had the numbers of missile-torn women, men and children been closer to 50 than 100?

Perhaps very wealthy people can visualise the concept of "one million". I cannot, except as an abstraction. Human suffering, however, is concrete. When I think of the human cost of the Nazi scourge, I think of individual men, women and children, of the almost inconceivable degradation of being hated and despised by mere virtue of your birth, the mind-boggling pain of being torn away from your loved ones, not knowing of their fate, seeing them suffer.

I think of the humiliation of hunger, the agony of physical pain, the loss of home, friends, family, the unbearable desolation of facing death without hope. I think of what it was like to be Jew in Europe of the '20s, '30s and '40s, and I think of what it is like to be a Palestinian today, and for the past 50 years. A thousand, ten thousand, a million are just more and more and endlessly more of what already is inconceivable pain.

Why then the great hue and cry over Roger Garaudy's latest book, *The Founding*

Myths of Israeli Politics, and in particular over the fact that he questions the accuracy of the claim that six million Jews were killed in the Nazi-perpetrated holocaust?

Is the European sense of guilt over this particular product of Western civilization so fragile as to make the murder of one or two million innocent Jews, men, women and children, any less horrifying than that of six? Does the lesser figure make Nazism any less the monstrous abomination that it was, and remains — even if the neo-Nazi hooligans of today reveal a preference for Turk and Arab-bashing, instead of the commie, gypsy and Jew-bashing of the '30s and '40s?

I have not studied the evidence, nor have I had the chance to read Garaudy's book on the matter, having access only to passages quoted by the press. I am in no position to judge for myself whether he is right or wrong in disputing the sanctified figure for Jewish deaths at Nazi hands. But surely this is a matter that only scientific inquiry could settle.

The whole affair is of course highly reminiscent of the court cases which Egyptian Islamists have been initiating against scholars and artists such as Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid and Yousef Chahine. Allowing for the massive dissimilarity in power and influence between the Zionist movement, on

one hand, and the Islamist movement, on the other, the mechanism is the same — and it is one wherein the symbolic character of the cases in question is of much more significance than the actual issues involved.

For the Zionist movement, what is really at stake is not whether the Nazis murdered one, two or six million Jews, but that it is not permissible for anyone to explore Jewish history outside a Zionist perspective. Zionism sets the law — its official version of the holocaust is no less sanctified than its version of the history of its conquest of Palestine — "the land without a people, for the people without a land".

Abbé Pierre, who has received his fair share of vilification for coming to Garaudy's defence, has been quoted by the French paper *Liberation* as pointing out the rather obvious fact that it was the European Catholic Hitler who murdered European Jews. He added, however, that, "When we wanted to clear our consciences of Hitler's crimes, we chose the easiest solution: expelling the Palestinians from their land."

In the post-World War II chapter of Jewish history, as set into sacred law by political Zionism, the massacre of men, women and children is belittled, clouded, denied. Much more significantly, it is made into no more than numbers.

In Walid Aouni's  
The Last  
Interview at  
El-Gomhouria  
Theatre Nehad  
Selaiha finds  
a moving tribute  
to a great artist



photo: Waellet Denyer

## Landscapes of memory

Despite the superior technical facilities of the Cairo Opera main hall, Walid Aouni fought to have his latest production of the life and work of the great Egyptian painter, Tahiya Halim, shown at the Gomhouria Theatre where it would be seen by a wider audience. And he got his way — albeit only for six nights. Did the choice of venue have anything to do with the fact that this production has been almost unanimously voted the most accessible of all Aouni's work in Egypt? Or was it the choice of subject that did the trick?

Tahiya Halim, as she herself admits in the recording that accompanies the performance, is loved and respected by everybody. "It is true," she says, "that those whom God favours, He endows with the love of everyone." Even those who are unfamiliar with her work venerate her name. She is something of a national figure — a woman who has carved a unique and distinctive artistic niche and with it a prestigious international reputation.

But rich and exciting as Halim's art is, her personal life does not strike one at first as the stuff dramas are made of. She was born into an aristocratic family of Turkish and upper-Egyptian origins, studied art privately, met a young painter two years older than herself (Hamed Abdalla) who helped her discover Egypt, the world and herself, fell in love with him and eventually married him. Together they studied in Paris for three years, living in very strained circumstances on a meagre stipend supplied by her mother, then, 12 years later, the marriage broke down. Abdalla remarried and settled in Paris and she remained in Egypt, close to the springs of her inspiration, living independently on her earnings from painting and teaching, nurturing her talent and her beloved cats. She never remarried.

She travelled widely, exhibiting all over the world, was bومored both abroad and at home, spent a month in Nubia on a state-organised trip before the waters of the Aswan Dam flooded the region, another month at a nursery near the village of Akhmin with her fellow painter and friend Inji Alfarouq. Her constant companion throughout

her life were her beloved cats. "Why Tahiya Halim?" I asked Aouni. In his cozy, but distractingly crowded study in Zamalek, he frankly admitted that "after *Coma*, the second part of my trilogy which took for its subject the work of Mahfouz and the attempt on his life, I wanted a female subject. I had already done the life of the historical female mystic Rab'a Al-Adawiya, in Brussels in 1983 and thought it was time to do the life of another important Arab woman."

The trilogy which started with *Excavations of Agatha* in 1993 is meant to be an imaginative and highly personal reading of all the forces and images that make up the consciousness of modern Egyptian history. In the *Excavations*, he romantically invoked four famous female figures who became connected with Egypt in different degrees and capacities — Agatha Christie, Rita Hayworth, Maria Callas and the Lebanese singer Asmahan. In *Coma*, the second part, Mahfouz as a young man, occupies the stage with his fictional characters. For the third part of the trilogy, Aouni wanted a female. But, again, why Halim?

"She is great and, more importantly, still living, (God grant her health and long life). One can talk to her and record her voice."

He interviewed her extensively and came away with 30 hours of stories, views, and reminiscences on tape, together with valuable slides of old family and personal photographs and of many of her inaccessible paintings, including the one called *War* which was stolen from the Egyptian Embassy in Paris. Of the 30 hours, only 50 minutes — all approved by Halim — went into the show, and of the many slides she chose nearly 30, including two of her mother, another of her father, and about 27 of her most famous work.

With her soft voice gently rippling into the auditorium, and all those paintings and photos flashing on the gigantic screen that formed the backdrop of the stage, her presence was intimately felt and it seemed as though we were at a larger than life exhibition of her work.

This in itself, alone, would have made the evening unforgettable. Knowing that nothing he can put on stage can match the beauty and power of those paintings, Aouni reduced his set to the minimum of bare essentials. The only fixed feature of the set was an old-fashioned wardrobe which occupied one corner of the stage and was used both realistically to hold the various costumes of the dancers (they changed in full view of the audience) and metaphorically, as the storehouse of memories wherein the ghosts of the past resided, occasionally emerging. The props which were carried in and out by the performers were few enough, functional, and extremely unobtrusive. Despite many expressionistic touches and a few abstract ones, the choreography was predominantly representational, following the direction of the recorded voice and the projected paintings — but without resort to crass or vulgar mime. The rich and varied musical collage from east and west nevertheless gave Aouni ample scope to exercise his inventive imagination and come up with a richly variegated choreographical tapestry that draws on various sources and traditions from classical ballet to Nubian folk dancing. Such movement designs are invariably taxing and in this show Aouni puts his dancers (eight men and six women) through a grueling test. They all passed it with flying colours and Nancy Tonsi who undertook the role of the painter has proved that not only is she an inspired dancer, but also a sensitive actress. The eight male dancers, all endowed with magnificent physiques (enhanced by the near nudity of the erotic costumes designed by Aouni), together with Reem Sayed Hegab (who recently starred in *Wozek* at El-Hanager) and the four female dancers in Nubian dress played various parts impersonating the characters from Halim's past.

The performance opens with a stirring *tableau vivant*: Halim's voice speaks to us of art and the task of the painter to us of the strains of Anwar Ibrahim's lute, while Tonsi stands silhouetted with poised brush in hand, facing an empty canvas marked out in a grid, ready for

painting; at her feet, the eight male dancers lie like dead matter waiting for the touch of her brush to be shaped and come alive through art. The subsequent scenes vary in tone, mood and rhythm; they run the whole gamut of emotions from zest and vitality to gentle sorrow and wistful nostalgia.

As we draw near the end, Aouni contrives a gripping contrapuntal sequence which, more than anything else in the show, expresses the depth and power of his affection for the painter. Here Halim, who had at an early point in the show glimpsed the silent shadow of an old woman crossing the stage behind the screen while she was folding a white sheet (shroud?), comes face to face with her aged self (Reem Sayed Hegab) and recognises in her the same old woman. The young and old Halim perform a farewell dance on a totally empty stage before they part. As the cast move in to carry the old Halim, now dead, off stage, holding her up high, as if carrying a coffin, we hear the real Halim's voice telling us how much she would like to paint just such a picture. The young Halim, however, the eternal artist, is undefeated; she performs a jubilant, light-hearted dance in accompaniment to some Andalusian *magamat*, which date back to the 12th century, chanted by the Lebanese singer Fadia Al-Haj. As the male performers join in, now openly wearing cat masks with one impersonating her absent lover Abdalla, the mood becomes positively festive and even carnivalesque; the shadows of death are completely routed.

The very final scene is a real cop de theatre which puts all that has gone before in focus: the stage is bare and empty and all the performers have gone. (Those, our actors were only spirits and are melted into air, into thin air — one remembers.) A photo of Halim now, in her old age, smiles at us from the screen: we hear her saying, while the curtains begin to slowly close: "I have never been afraid of death. I have lived and travelled and laughed and cried, and will accept my fate when it comes. We are like actors. We play our parts. When the play is done, we leave the stage."

The First Spring Exhibition  
*Dorothy Gallery*, 17 *Young El-Gaadi*, El-Gaadi Hall, Main Campus, AUC, El-Shiekh El-Zayat St. Tel 337 5436. Daily exc Sun, 10am-2pm & 5pm-8pm. Until 15 May.

*Haifa Moustahwi* (Sculpture)  
*Espace Gallery*, 3 El-Sherif St, Downtown, Tel 393 1699. Daily exc Fri, 10am-2pm & 5pm-8pm. Until 20 May.

*Traditional Arts Fair & General Exhibition*  
*El-Gaadi*, Main Campus, AUC, El-Shiekh El-Zayat St. Tel 337 5436. Daily exc Fri, 10am-2pm & 5pm-8pm. Forty Egyptian artists exhibit their work.

*Student Exhibitions*  
*El-Gaadi*, Main Campus, AUC, El-Shiekh El-Zayat St. Tel 337 5436. Daily exc Fri, 9am-5pm. Until 31 May.

*Maged Abdell-Aziz* (Paintings) & *Hassan Osman* (Sculpture)  
*El-Gaadi*, 3 El-Nasr St, Zamalek, Tel 340 2693. Daily 10am-2pm & 5pm-8pm. Until 31 May.

*The Museum of Mr and Mrs Mohamed and Mohamed Khalil*  
*1, Kafra El-Ushaidi*, St. Dokki, Tel 336 2376. Daily exc Mon, 10am-5pm.

Egypt's largest collection of nineteenth century European art, arranged by the late Mohamed Khalil, including works by Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse and Rodin.

*El-Sayed El-Khatib* (Paintings)  
*El-Sherif*, Main Campus, AUC, El-Shiekh El-Zayat St. Tel 337 5436. Daily exc Sun, 10am-2pm & 5pm-8pm. Until 15 May.

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# He who remained

Last Thursday Palestinian novelist and political activist Emile Habibi died in Haifa, the town in which he was born. It was his wish to have the poet Mahmoud Darwish, another Palestinian who grew up in Haifa but for a quarter of a century had been prohibited from returning, to lead the funeral orations. Interviewed after the funeral Darwish recalled parading through the streets of the town, on May Day, behind Habibi.

Habibi left instructions that the words "He who remained in Haifa" be inscribed on his tombstone. It is this remaining, as opposed to returning, that is the key to Habibi's literary production and political struggle. A member of the Israeli Knesset for 20 years, Habibi resigned to dedicate himself to writing, producing *Al-Waq'a' Al-Ghariba fi ikhtifa'* Saeed Abi-Nahs Al-Mutash'al (The Strange Events Surrounding the Disappearance of Saeed, the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist), a novel which brilliantly captures the ambivalence marking the lives of

those Palestinians who became citizens of Israel.

Throughout his political life Habibi remained a controversial figure. His acceptance of the 1947 UN resolution establishing two states on the land of Palestine and, from the early 1950s, his membership of the Israeli parliament, tended to be viewed by Arab nationalists as an acceptance of the right of the aggressors to remain where they had no right to be. Habibi, though, always argued that acceptance was the best that could be hoped for from a bad lot. In 1992, when Habibi accepted Israel's most prestigious literary prize, the controversy reached its height. Many leading Arab intellectuals, including Darwish, urged Habibi to refuse the



award, bestowed by Shamir. Whatever reservations were felt about Ha-

bibi's political stance there is no doubt that "pessoptimism", a portmanteau word combining pessimism and optimism which Habibi introduced into the Arabic language, has become a catchword among Arab intellectuals over the last two decades. Taking *Candide* as a point of departure, Habibi introduces Swiftian shadows into Voltaire's irony, producing a world of black comedy that confronts his readers with painful, unresolved questions.

"It could have been worse." So intones Saeed the Pessoptimist, representative not only of alienated and oppressed Palestinians, but an archetypal, universal anti-hero who teeters forever on the brink of the abyss yet contrives never to fall. "It could have been worse." Taking Pangloss's best of all possible worlds a step further, Habibi constructed his own strategy to confront the desperate daily reality of his nation.

## The place of the question mark

Arab culture in Israel is the result of the successful struggle of the few Palestinian Arabs who managed to stay in their homeland, in the area of Palestine where the state of Israel was established, in 1948. They numbered no more than 140-150,000, out of more than 800,000 Palestinian Arabs who were living in this area before the establishment of Israel. Arab culture was thus moulded in the fire of this struggle [constituting] one of its main weapons against Zionist policies and the practice of uprooting Palestinian Arabs from their towns and villages, their agricultural land and from their homeland. It could not persist and flourish where Zionist ideology ruled supreme without being the direct antithesis of that ideology.

Arab culture had to confront — directly, courageously and without any hesitation — the retarded culture of racism with the noble human culture of equality and the brotherhood of people and nations. The culture of racism is retarded, if not worse; vandalism breeds invalids even if they are able to calculate their accounts with computers and use sophisticated weaponry. The stone age savagery of the anti-Arab racists has aroused against them, against the mark of Cain, hundreds and thousands of our Jewish brothers and sisters in Israel.

Israel's former army chief of staff, Raphael Eitan, compared our brothers and sisters in the Occupied Territories to "cockroaches in a bottle". Ex-prime minister Begin, who said that he saw around him everywhere the ghosts of his dead soldiers, has called the Palestinians "animals walking on two legs". The 400,000 Jewish brothers and sisters who demonstrated against the crimes of Sabra and Shatila are not invalids, but the standard bearers of the validity of our cultural principles — the principle of the brotherhood of nations.

It is the racists who are invalids. Let me give you a recent example concerning a senior official in the Israeli Censorship Department. He is no doubt a university man. We had arranged a national festival of Arab theatrical groups. We gave the festival a traditional name, the Day of the Mill: *Yom El-Tahoon Yom*. In the old days the villagers considered the day when they ground their corn and wheat as a day of popular gatherings and festivity. The professor-censor, who is supposed to know Arabic better than the Arabs, misinterpreted this slogan. In Arabic, it is as I have said *Yom El-Tahoon Yom*. But he read it as *Yom Eli-Tahoon Yom*. But he ordered the police to forbid the festival. We tried to explain his mistake to him, but he insisted that he knew better.

Such are in general the people who rule over our country and who think they can decide the fate of our people... both inside and outside the green line. This may explain the fact that only progressive Arab culture, particularly literature, could persist and develop in Israel.

Arab culture in Israel... (is) the continuation of Arab culture and heritage in general. The universalist features of Arab literature in Israel today are a continuation of this heritage, made preeminent by the internationalist education of those who continued to live in Palestine, those whom the disaster of 1948 spurred in order to fulfil the duty of continuing Arab culture in Israel and by the objective necessity of challenging the racism and mystification of Zionist ideology.

It should be emphasised here that the preeminence in Arab literature produced in Israel of... universalist features is a continuation of a feature of Palestinian Arab literature produced before the creation of Israel. We consider ourselves... pupils of the distinguished progressive Arab writers of Palestine: Abu Salma, Ibrahim Tuan, Abdellah Rahim, Mahmoud Mukhlas Amr and others who were either put to the sword or buried in the ruins of their own towns and villages or in the quicksands of destination...

Direct and daily confrontation with Zionist policies and the practice of expelling the Arab people from their homeland, the direct and daily confrontation with racist Zionist ideology, contributed specific new features to Arab culture in Israel. We have all the facts in the sphere of policy and practice which prove that the Zionist leadership before and after the establishment of Israel understood the Jewish state in Palestine as being purely Jewish, cleansed of the country's Arabs...

In March 1955 the head of the political department of the Histadrut (Israeli Trade Union Federation), the late Ruben Barakat, expressed this astonishment in the following words: "We have not gained practice yet," he said, "in our behaviour towards minorities. We expected the State of Israel to be a pure Jewish State without minorities." By "minorities" is meant... the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel. Until today the existence of another people in Israel — the Palestinian Arab people — is refused. They refuse to recognise this people even in the Occupied Territories. We are, in the eyes of Zionist ideology, either non-existent infiltrators or terrorists.

The late Golda Meir went to her grave declaring "Where is this so-called Palestinian Arab people?" Yet this same lady confessed openly — without seeing the fatal contradiction — that she was kept awake at night whenever she remembered that every minute an Arab child was born in Israel. An ex-member of the Likud ruling faction, Amnon Len, expressed astonishment at the fact that even the cold-blooded massacre of 49 peaceful Arab villagers while returning to their village of Kufur Qasem at the end of a day of back-breaking toil in their fields did not force the Arabs of the neighbouring villages... to flee Israel.

This unprovoked massacre, committed by a contingent of the Israeli army on the orders of their superiors, took place on 29 October, 1956 — the very day on which the tripartite aggression against Egypt began. Amnon Len published an article in the evening newspaper *Yediot Ahronot* on 19 December, 1975, which concluded as follows:

"We lived in the country until 1956 in an atmosphere of anticipation. The Jews anticipated that the Arabs would leave the country, but at this stage [1956] it became clear to the Jews that the Arabs who had stayed in Israel did not intend to leave the state." Even the repulsive incident of Kufur Qasem, he said, "did not bring the Arabs of the neighbouring villages to the conclusion that they should run away across the border."

I do not intend in the scope of this paper to relate the history of our popular struggle in Israel. I only wish to stress that our struggle, helped and supported by our Jewish democratic brothers, was not an easy one. Our people had from the very beginning to fight to secure the elementary rights of a citizen in his own country. Our women and children had many times to throw their bodies before the wheels of army trucks in order to stop those trucks from carrying their fathers and husbands and brothers across the borders after they were declared to be infiltrators. A knock at your door one night during those dark days was not a knock of a visiting neighbour, it was either a sign that they were coming for you to throw you out of your

home and away from your family or a sign that your friend and comrades had been taken away.

To be or not to be: that was, and... is, the challenge with which we and our culture were confronted by Israel from the beginning. Yet we were able not only to frustrate the Zionist policy and practice of expelling our people from their homeland, we were able to instill pride in new generations of our people. Always we remind our proud new generations of comments made by Yuri Lubrat, one-time advisor to the Israeli prime minister on minority problems, the present advisor on the Lebanese problem, who in 1961, while defending the military rule imposed on the Arabs until 1966, expressed his disappointment that there were many Arab students in the universities...

I am not indulging in self-praise; I am speaking of a people and their culture. I wish to give an example from Ghassan Kanafani's well-known novel *Men in the Sun*. It took Kanafani more than 10 years from the tragedy of the Arab people of Palestine in 1948 to reach the conclusion that if you do not knock with both hands on the walls of the tank in which you are imprisoned, and unless you shout, you will die... without anyone taking any notice. We in Israel have not been given the leisure to wait... Either we knock and shout every minute of every day or we will be knocked out and find ourselves behind iron bars or worse.

It is for this reason that we cherish the limited — and in a sense wide — democracy which exists in Israel, whose value is curtailed by pro-fascist ruling circles. But if we are and are able to knock and shout, the credit is due to the just... policy we pursue, a policy made possible by the common democratic struggle of Jews and Arabs against aggression, national oppression and racial discrimination, for de-

Text of an unpublished talk, the original title of which is *The Continuation of Arab Culture in Israel*, given by Emile Habibi at The Society of Friends' House, Euston Road, London: 1984

By Mounir Barghouti

## A magician of paradoxes

By Mounir Barghouti

With the cunning of someone looking for the exit to a building that has collapsed Emile Habibi discovered that only irony was capable of telling the sad story of our Arab reality. The collapse of the Arab world, a vast world, rich in human, natural and cultural resources, is a collapse lacking grandeur. Our fall happens without even a sound, without a befitting elegy, as if it is a tragedy that is not tragic, a comedy that is not comic.

This is the duality which Emile adopted as a creative tool for his writing: certainty and doubt, laughter and tears, heroism and treachery, optimism and pessimism. Almost all of the literary works of this renowned Palestinian writer appear to tell his story, the story of a very humorous person living in a very dismal reality. The foreign occupation destroys, among other things, the mind. In such a situation does irony then become a type of resistance? Broken but full of mirth, defeated but strong, a coward but a hero — this is the character which Emile, in *Al-Waq'a' Al-Ghariba fi ikhtifa'* Saeed Abi-Nahs Al-Mutash'al (The Strange Events Surrounding the Disappearance of Saeed, the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist) manoeuvred to cope with the time and place in which he lived. He presented us with a model of a human being living on the edge, searching, laughing, weeping and always trying to make ends meet on that edge. At times broken and fragile, at others, brave and self-possessed, it was as though Habibi, in this character, provided a figure embodying contemporary Arab reality in its entirety.

Because he was a conjurer of paradoxes he was bound to become himself the victim of a paradox, the consequences of which stunned him more than they

shocked both his friends and his foes. Having built his literary reputation upon the optimism-pessimism dialectic, Emile became ensnared solely in optimism regarding the recent history of the Palestinian cause, launching an attack against the "pessimists" and those in the opposition. This brought upon him many criticisms and enmities which, in turn, made him more stubborn. He did not hesitate to accept a prize from the Israeli state, thus dropping doubt from certainty and pessimism from optimism. The pomegranate of dialectics slipped through the hands of the magician of dialectics, its seeds scattering around him. It was as if he could not gather them again except in the final paradox which is his death.

I met him for the first time in Prague in 1979, after which we continued to meet in the many capitals of our diaspora, especially in Cairo. At the last dinner bringing us together over two years ago he said to me in passing, while reminiscing about his career: "Our life has not been in vain." He then paused, that enigmatic smile, devil's advocate smile lighting up in his eyes, and, as if he could not bear to let the chance of making a humorous remark slip by, added: "But it has been in vain."

Israel is trying to claim Emile Habibi for itself. But he should know that his literary works were nothing other than his means of resisting it and of asserting his identity and the identity, threatened by the occupation, of his Palestinian people. In this sense, and in many other senses, "it" has not been in vain.

Mounir Barghouti is a Palestinian poet living in Cairo.

Anyone familiar with the work and life of Emile Habibi will immediately appreciate the central role the two categories, "those who remained" and "those who are to return", played in both his writings and his life. His entire literary output is stamped by this division, and it is no accident that two of the four parts of his most celebrated novel, *Saeed the Pessoptimist*, are titled *Sanayya* (who remained) and *Yaa'ud* (who is to be returned). And between those who remained and those who are to be returned lies the mediating concept of *Jama' al-shamal* (reuniting the two categories).

In *Saeed the Pessoptimist* Saeed's one-time headmaster is found, at the beginning of the novel, in the Jazair Mosque in Acre, surrounded by ghostlike figures. When Saeed asks the teacher what he is doing he replies "Ajma' al-shamal" (I reunite families). The date is 1948, when reuniting families meant searching desperately for loved ones lost in the chaos of the exodus, or insisting on burying the dead in a native town before embarking on a journey of exile.

When, in the middle of the night, the Israeli soldiers knock at the door

of the mosque to announce that the army has decided to return those refugees who had sought sanctuary in the mosque to their villages of origin, some slip out of the side gates saying: "Those who razed our villages are not going to take us back there."

There is a hunger for knowledge and for reunion.

"We are from Kwaykab. They demolished it and evicted everyone. Did you meet anyone from Kwaykab?"

"I am from Al-Manshiyya. There is not a stone left standing there except the tombs. Did you meet anyone from Al-Manshiyya?"

"We over here are from Berwah. They forced us out and obliterated it. Did you meet anyone from there?"

Berwah is the native village of the poet Mahmoud Darwish who was six years old in 1948. When Saeed tells those questioning him at the mosque that he had seen one Berwah woman hiding with her child among the same stalks there is no doubt in the reader's mind that the child in question is Darwish, to whom Habibi referred earlier in the novel in the first amazing incident witnessed by Saeed the Pessoptimist.

Saeed had seen a mother, insisting that she return to Berwah, driven

away by a gun aimed at her child's head. When the woman finally yielded to the threats and began, as ordered, to move eastward, Saeed noted that "the further the women and the child went from where we were, the governor and I, the taller they grew. By the time they merged with their own shadows in the sinking sun they had become bigger than the plain of Acre itself. The governor still stood there awaiting their final disappearance... Finally he was asked in amazement: 'Will they never disappear?'

But tall shadows do not simply disappear on request. And what Habibi once said about Darwish applies equally to him. His last gesture before dying was an act of *Jama' al-shamal*, of reuniting the exiled poet with his people. It is a gesture that will have raised a great many eyebrows. But along with the epiphany on his grave stone, simply marking the final resting place of one "who remained in Haifa", it was a perfectly choreographed act, worthy of that great master, Habibi the Pessoptimist.

Emile Habibi, born Haifa 1922, died Haifa, 2 May 1996. Writer, journalist, political activist and former

## Plain Talk

That European unity has now gone beyond politics and economics to embrace culture is evidenced in a file sent me by the Austrian ambassador about the "European Art Forum". An international cultural symposium, the forum will take place in Salzburg from 23 to 25 May.

The European Art Forum was founded by the State of Salzburg, renowned by such annual cultural landmarks as the Mozart Festival. The aim of the forum, as stated in the file, "is organising annual international meetings on topics of artistic, cultural and political significance." The file highlights the growing understanding that "the future of Europe is dependent not only on economic factors, but to a great extent on cultural development."

Going through the programme one is greatly impressed by both the presence of such distinguished speakers as the president of the Republic of Austria, the governor of Salzburg and Edward Said and by the diversity of the topics. Different working groups will deal with such subjects as "The European Identity from Cultural, Economic and Political Viewpoints", "Arts and Communication of the Future Europe" and "Festivals: Custodians of Tradition or Trendsetters".

While all the topics are of equal significance, it was natural that the question of cultural identity should interest me. While the cultural identity of Europe will be an important factor in the process of European integration, it is clear that in spite of the dynamism of the unification process, there are some inherent dangers. There are undeniable signs that the citizens of the member states fear losing their culturally-defined identities. France, in spite of its deeply rooted and ancient culture, is one of the countries which has expressed some reservations about the issue. This became quite clear, not only in its interaction within the European union, but vis-à-vis GATT negotiations.

The issue is to what extent culture should have a differentiating or integrating effect. Would that old adage, "unity in diversity", be valid here? And for a country like ours, what is meant by European culture? Or to put it differently, is there a common culture for Europe?

The cultural foundations of most European countries are their Graeco-Roman heritage, with a Christian addition. This is, no doubt, a unifying element as far as classical culture is concerned. Shakespeare went back to Plutarch for his plots and many European writers were inspired by Dante. But then, I suppose, modern European culture is different. What we read or see in the cultural output of European countries is as different between Eastern and Western culture.

Another issue which will be raised in the Forum is "Cultural Policy on a European Level". What are the characteristics of such a policy and what are, if any, the common values? One thing worth adding in light of the newly emerging racial prejudices concerns the kind of culture to be taught to the young. At a time when UNESCO is initiating "culture for peace", we find that Europe is far removed from such a policy.

There is no doubt that the forum will be a useful meeting place for the airing of controversial issues. True, the event is a European forum, but, I am sure, it would be more effective if non-Europeans participated. Surely, they can contribute usefully to the discussions.

Mursi Saad El-Din

## In praise of the two tall shadows

By Mona Anis

member of the Israeli Knesset, Habibi received his *Baccaulaureat* in Acre. He worked as a clerk in an oil company before joining the Palestinian Broadcasting Station's cultural section. He resigned his radio post in 1945, joining the Palestinian Communist Party as a full-time political activist. Founding member of the Palestinian League for National Liberation, a signatory to the Beirut Four-Party Manifesto which called for the acceptance of the 1947 UN resolution establishing Jewish and Palestinian states on the land of Palestine. From 1952 until 1972 he represented the Communist Party of Israel (RAKAH) in the Israeli Knesset. Editor of the party's Arabic newspaper, Al-Iftah, until his resignation in 1989, following increasingly bitter disputes with the party leadership. Author of The Sextet of the Six Days (1968), The Strange Events Surrounding the Disappearance of Saeed, the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist (1974), Lukas' Son of Lukas (1980), Akhriya (1985), The Fanciful Tale of Saraya, the Ghoul's Daughter (1991), I'm Al-Rubabida (1992) and A Word Without Cages: Letters and Literary Articles (1993).

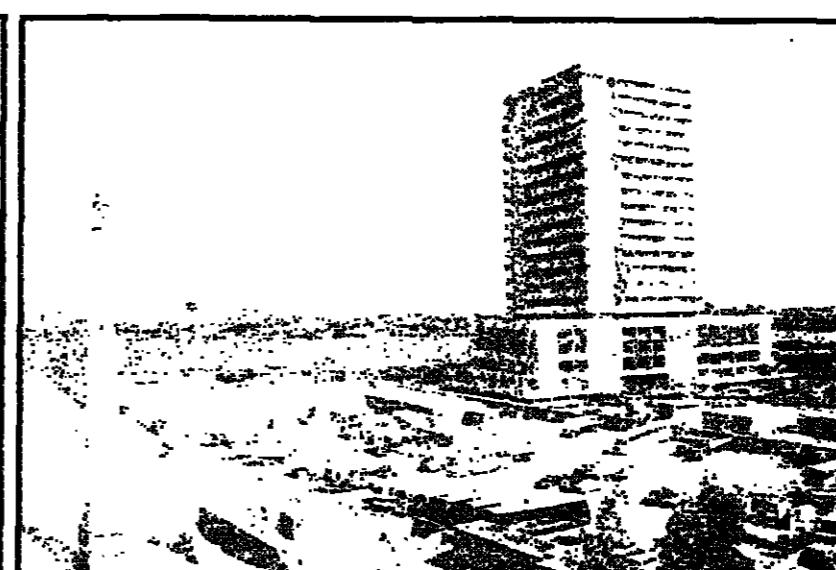
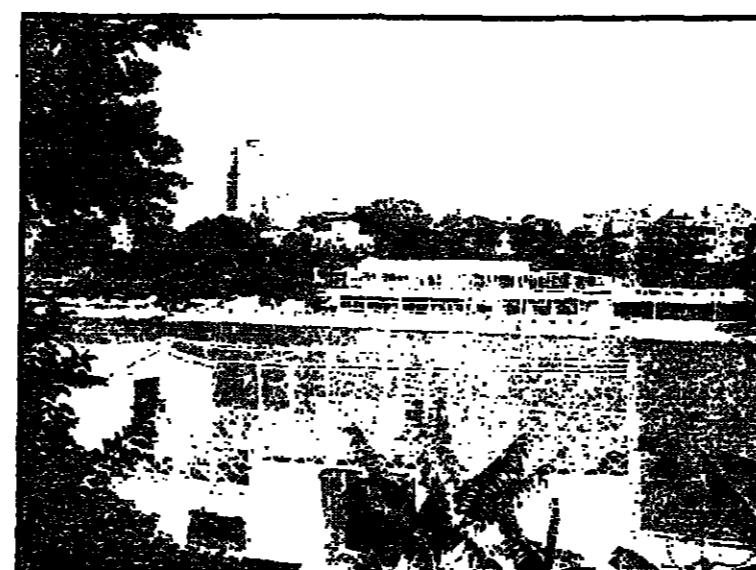


# Privatising the Nile?

Is Nile-view to become a privilege enjoyed only by the rich? **Sahar El-Bahr** finds out that a walk along the Nile is no longer the simple pleasure it once was



The proliferation of exclusive restaurants, private clubs and high-rise buildings has blocked more pristine views of the Nile



photos: Sherif Sotbol



**A CLOSER VIEW:**  
Already, 90 per cent of the Nile's banks in Cairo are occupied by businesses and private clubs, according to the Ministry of Public Works and Water Resources. The city's corniches, once a favourite meeting place for young couples, are fast becoming exclusive haunts where only the rich can afford to drink in the romance of the river.

In an attempt to provide greater access to the Nile, last September authorities opened a public walkway adjacent to Qasr Al-Nil bridge. Walkways along other Nile sites in Cairo and the Delta are also in the works. The official scheme is intended to combat erosion of the river's banks as well as provide recreational facilities for the public.

Few Cairenes of a certain age group do not associate their first romance with hand-held walks along the Nile Corniche. Peanuts, *lib*, roasted corn on the cob, roasted sweet potatoes, soft drinks, and whispered sweet nothings were some of the other ingredients of these romantic excursions. At regular intervals, marble benches provided couples, families and friends with a place to rest their feet, gaze at the flowing waters of the Nile and revel in the ancient river's beauty and grandeur.

Cairenes can still walk along the Nile. More often than not however they have to satisfy themselves with increasingly rarer glimpses of the river. Already, 90 per cent of the Nile's banks in Greater Cairo are occupied by businesses and private clubs, according to recent statistics released by the Ministry of Public Works and Water Resources.

"This is not fair," lamented Awad Mahmoud, a 33-year-old plumber, who often strolls along the Nile Corniche with his family. But family walks have become more and more frustrating, the simple pleasures of the Nile have become far too expensive for most Egyptians to enjoy. As he stood before one of the many plant nurseries which during the past few years have proliferated along the Nile Corniche, obstructing a view of the river, he explained: "If I want to get a closer view, I must either be a member of a social club or spend lots of money in a five-star restaurant which I cannot afford."

He added bitterly, "Soon, the Nile will be hidden completely and for the majority of Egyptians, it will become something of a legend — a fairy tale."

Centuries ago, the pharaohs paid tribute to the Nile with grand festivals. Before burying the dead, two witnesses were required to swear that the deceased did not insult the Gods or pollute the Nile. But urbanisation quashed such sacred traditions.

Today, the famous river winds through the mighty metropolis which rests on its banks, gathering with its pollution and slowly tapering out of sight.

"These days I can walk several kilometres along

the corniche without catching even a glimpse of the water," said Wagdi Riyad, deputy chairman of the Environment and Development Writers Association (EDWA). Today, a trip along the corniche extending from El-Giza Bridge to El-Gazar Bridge provides the perfect view of a string of five-star restaurants/cafes; social clubs for the police, the armed forces, the judges, the Ministry of Finance, the telecommunications authority and the veterinarian doctors; and a training centre for the Central Security Forces. Zamalek's Abul-Feda Street, once one of the city's more prominent lovers' lanes, is fast having its Nile view blocked by a string of social clubs and restaurants.

As the river's banks fill up, commercial ventures are choking smaller vendors' means of subsistence. Amin Toumy, 60, sells roasted corn on the cob on the corniche in Boulak. During the day, he works as a carpenter and at night he comes to the Nile to earn extra money to support his four children. Crowds are a problem these days, especially on weekends and holidays, says Toumy, due to the limited space available. In front of his burning coals is one of the few places people can still have simple fun, according to Toumy. "These days, the Nile is like a private sector organisation," said Riyad.

Concerned environmentalists and writers have been protesting since the 1950s that the river's banks are in danger of sinking beneath the weight of too many establishments and too much pollution. Others allege that mismanagement and corruption have hastened the demise of the river. The daily *Al-Ahbar*'s columnist Mustafa Amin demanded to know: "Has the Nile's beauty faded? Must we cover it up?" Modern society is violating the river's sanctity, Amin charged.

Serious pollution is just one side effect of the many infringements on the Nile's sanctity. According to Ibrahim El-Kilany, professor at the Faculty of Agriculture, El-Zagazig University, and the deputy chairman of the environmentally-concerned Green Party: "There are almost 10,000 establish-

ments on the river's banks, the majority of which dump their waste into the Nile. In some places, the level of pollution is seven times the level allowed internationally," he said.

Ordinary Egyptians are forced to inhale dangerous exhaust fumes if they want to stroll along the river, protested El-Kilany. He estimated that 10 per cent of the population can afford a closer view of the water in ritzy restaurants, while the remaining majority must walk bridges among thousands of cars.

In a quite spot on the corniche, a man in his 50s is sitting down peacefully in front of the Nile, meditating and blocking out the noise around him. His name is Gamal Massoud, an engineer in a private sector company. High-rise hotels tower above him. Massoud suggested that the owners of these establishments should contribute funds to help clean and beautify the Nile. After all, he noted, it is the river's beauty which makes their property so valuable.

Those who own property on the Nile are accused of violating the laws governing the use of the river's banks. Ahmed Samir, a plant nursery owner, admitted that many property owners rent the banks to their own to five-star Nile-boats in return for large sums of money. Other owners, after getting their licences, dump their waste into the Nile, build high fences around their establishments and leave the surrounding trees to grow without trimming their leaves.

Most of these trespasses are rarely addressed. Statistics from the Ministry of Public Works and Water Resources show that from January to March 1995, out of 2,431 trespasses registered, only 706 were removed. The previous year, only 23 per cent of complaints were dealt with. The most common violations include building high metal or concrete fences, erecting concrete buildings, illegally occupying land, dumping waste into the river and illegally expanding land holdings with sand fill-ins when the water level is low.

Riyad put the problem down to mismanagement: "It is basically an administrative problem and it is high time to start thinking of forming a national authority concerned with Nile affairs." Such a body should include among its members professors from the Faculty of Fine Arts, he added.

Property owners claim they are drowning in a sea of bureaucracy. "I had to get six licences from six different government bodies in order to establish a plant nursery — the ministries of public works and water resources, tourism, agriculture, interior, the Cairo Governorate; and the municipal council in charge of the district. I pay monthly dues to these ministries and bodies for everything including the signs, stairs, gate and water for irrigation. I paid them again when they finally issued me the licence," recalled Maher El-Karm, who owns a nursery on the Nile's banks.

El-Karm believes the concerned ministries and government bodies are vying for control of the Nile. El-Kilany attributes the abundance of violations to the 13 different concerned bodies in charge of the river, among which are the ministries of agriculture, public works, tourism and interior; the Antiquities Authority; city governors; and the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency.

Each concerned body has its own regulations governing the use of the Nile. Since all have the authority to issue retail licence, cite violations, and levy fines, discrepancies abound and the subsequent mismanagement leaves loopholes for property owners to violate the law with little fear of repercussions. And those who are supposed to respect the law are the ones who violate it, asserted El-Kilany. "The issue of occupancy and encroachments is a sensitive one," he said. Since social clubs for the police, armed forces, and judges have illegally built high fences around their property, "how can the other owners be asked to comply with the law?" El-Kilany wondered.

According to Zeinab El-Gharably, general manager of the central administration for maintaining the

waterways in the Ministry of Public Works and Water Resources, Law No 12 of 1984 gives licence for businesses to build along the Nile. The Ministry of Public Works and Water Resources is the main authority in charge of the Nile and it gives final approval for business licences.

But successive ministry administrations have had different policies. The policy of the current ministry, according to El-Gharably, is to limit new licences and renewals. Other plans include ensuring local residents get a closer view of the water: "We are planning to build one walkway every 100 metres between the Nile and the establishments for people to stroll on. The walkway between Qasr El-Nil bridge and 15 of May Bridge is already complete," El-Gharably explained.

Regular site inspections to check for violations and issue warnings are also part of the ministry's duties. El-Gharably agreed that fines for past violations have been too low. A violation is cited first as a warning. She added that a grace period of 15 days is granted: "If an owner refuses to comply with the law, permission will be obtained from the Ministry of Interior to shut down the establishment." However, the police have often failed to follow through and close down the offending establishment.

To avoid the enormous number of infringements, El-Gharably suggested forming a specialised police body affiliated to the Ministry of Public Works and Water Resources to enforce stiffer penalties than existing ones. But some violations are not so easy to address, claims El-Gharably. "Steel, iron, sugar and cement factories pollute the Nile, but they are not within our jurisdiction because they are national projects affiliated to the public sector."

Some see turning the Nile into a natural protectorate as the best solution. Painter Yehia Abu Hamda said that action must be taken to "eradicate the visual pollution" which haphazard and irregular development has spread. "Officials have failed to encourage an architectural style suitable to the river — one that reflects its splendour," said the painter.

## River rickshaw

As captain and crew of a human-powered river taxi, Yasser Eid seems to have one of the world's most strenuous jobs.

Tarek Atia reads between the lines



photos: Sherif Sotbol

Let's say you've got to cross the Nile, and there are no bridges for miles. It tends to happen a lot, especially when you leave Greater Cairo. In most cases, your only option is a rickety boat docked on your side of the river. As you board, you'll probably notice that there are no oars, just a long cord reaching out from the boat all the way across to the other bank. The captain and a few passengers are lounging round the wooden vessel as though waiting for Godot. Nothing happens, nobody moves, people are having conversations, or else just staring off into the distance. You look at your watch. You have an appointment on the other bank, and you're already fifteen minutes late.

What do you do?

Probably what all human-powered river-taxi riders eventually

end up doing: you take charge and pull the boat across the river by yourself.

Don't worry — the driver won't mind. Take Yasser Eid Adel-Hamid, who runs just such a ferry-boat connecting a village called El-Darawa to the Qanater Agricultural Road — if it weren't for the anxious riders he'd have to do all the work himself. And since his home-made ferry-boat operates from 5am to 11pm every day, that would mean a donkey-load of pulling.

The 30-passenger vessel uses a simple pulley system weighed down by anchors on either bank. To get the boat moving across the river you tug on the anchor-cord like a miner heading up a shaft on a rope. Yasser is supposed to be the one at the reins, but he usually takes it easy. If it was up to him the boat would

probably leave the bank every fifteen minutes or so. It's his passengers who more often than not can't wait that long, and end up steering the boat across themselves.

Imagine if you drove the bus but still had to pay the fare. On Yasser's boat it costs 10 piastres to cross the river — the nice thing is you don't have to pay right away. Most of Yasser's customers cross over from El-Darawa to the Agricultural Road and back several times a day, so Yasser charges on what he calls a "yearly basis" — something approximating a season ticket. In other words, easy come, easy go.

Yasser, wearing sandals, jeans under his *galabiya* and a white head scarf, points to the El-Darawa bank, where a brick foundation stone has been laid down right by the river — a bridge will soon be built on this spot. But Yasser isn't too

worried about losing his main source of income anytime soon.

"You know what they say," says one of the passengers. "A century is like a day here. They were supposed to have already started building it this month. I bet you it won't be done for another ten years."

"What?" says the same passenger, grinning at his driver/friend. "You think after it's built he won't find some other way to make ends meet?"

Yasser says nothing. He seems utterly content with the job he inherited from his father, who inherited it from his father before him. But this human bridge, linking two sides of the river, as well as the past to the present, may be nearing its final moor.

# Quality: the first impression?



Organisation at the airport



photo: Ashraf Fares

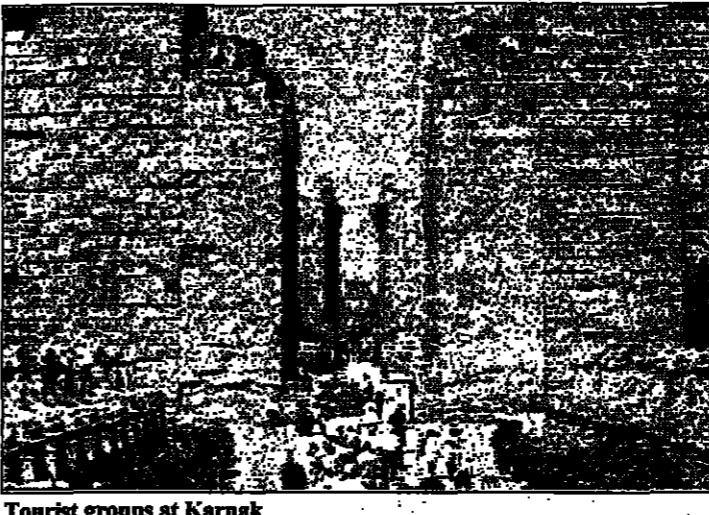


photo: Khaled El-Fiqi Tourist groups at Karnak

## Tripping over travel's hurdles

This year, Minister of Tourism Mamdouh El-Beltagui wanted to see Egypt rise as a viable competitor in the world tourism market and his expectations were couched with a plan: to organise training courses for the service sector that would "enhance the professional capabilities of those working in the tourist industry" and to increase collaboration between the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Education and the Tourist Chamber Union.

But the realisation of high quality services in the tourism industry requires more than just a slogan, a business mantra or training courses, say its most loyal members. Travel agents, airline representatives and hotel managers tackle day-by-day obstacles, such as overbooking, cancellations, discrepancies in travel agency itineraries and delays in domestic flights. If those problems are surmounted, the quality of tourism in Egypt might, one day, fulfil Beltagui's ideals. In the meantime, it is the tourist who falls victim to these glitches.

"You don't have a second chance to improve the first impression" is an adage that Nagwa Emad of Sonesta hotels stands by. "Quality services start from the moment we sign the contract with the tourist," she says, "and from the minute the tourist arrives at the airport." The airport is where some problems begin.

One of the most common pitfalls of airline travel are delays: delays in peak seasons; delays during the *hajj* (annual pilgrimage) and the *umra* (off-season pilgrimage); and delays when Egyptian teachers return for holidays from their academic year in the Gulf. When all three coincide, as they did between January and March of this year, the problem reaches aggravating heights. One solution, says Abdel-Aziz Sidiqi of EgyptAir, is more aircraft. He says that the airline plans to purchase "six modern planes which will arrive during the next two years."

Once the tourist leaves the airport, another obstacle to a leisurely trip might come by surprise: overbooking. In general, hotels have a policy of selling more rooms than are available; a measure taken to offset cancellations. If a hotel's capacity is 120 rooms, the hotel might accept bookings for 150. If no clients cancel, then there are no rooms for the extra 30 people.

In Nagwa Emad's view, travel agencies who "block-book" for an entire year "should release any unrequired rooms from their allotment so that we can use them." Failing that, hotels try to diminish their losses by overbooking. "And we cannot afford to make the travel agencies angry, because they are our bread and butter," says Emad.

The travel agencies have their own point of view. "This problem results from hotel miscalculations, not the travel agencies," argues Mohamed Reda of Lucky Tours. Along with hotels are the Nile cruiseboats, who also

overbook. He says. At peak seasons the tourist might be relegated to a hotel rather than a river boat. "This really annoys tourists, and they sometimes file lawsuits against us," he says.

Reda has a solution that would require "honesty and reliability" on the part of travel agencies. Foreign tour operators, he says, abide by certain rules: if the tour programme changes, the client is informed at least 35 days before arrival and the tourist is the ultimate decision-maker. If the new schedule does not suit the traveller, "then the travel agency should either cancel the trip or postpone it," says Reda.

In this vicious cycle of hotels that blame travel agencies and agencies that blame hotels, the bottom line is that the tourist suffers. "If a travel agency fools the foreign tour operator and doesn't carry out the programme as is," says Hassan El-Mufti, chairman of the board of Karnak Travel Agency, "then the tourists will not blame the travel agency. They will say that Egypt is not up to standard and the agency will not bring us tourists anymore."

When tourism was affected during the Gulf crisis and as a result of terrorist acts committed against tourists, tour operators abroad were understanding, says El-Mufti. "Now that tourism is back, we are expecting an influx of travellers. If we do not treat them in a professional way, then we will have a serious problem. One that will probably be worse than terrorism," he predicts.

What with overbookings, changes in itineraries and poor domestic flight connections, the pitfalls of "quality" service are serious and various solutions have been suggested. As travel agencies, hotels, government agencies and airlines all contribute to a tourist's experience, it is given to some critics that "quality" will only be reached if each of these bodies works hard and coordinates their business more fully.

In the short-term, proposes El-Mufti of Karnak Travel Agency, the culprits — be they travel agencies, hotels or Nile cruises — should be punished. "By that, I mean terminate their activities."

In the long-term, he thinks Egyptian society should improve its outlook: "We do not really have any tourist education or culture. We should teach students in schools how to draw benefit from tourism," he says. "There is a vast difference between gaining benefits or making fraudulent gains from a tourist."

As international tourist destinations compete in opening their arms in wide welcome to the travellers who increase their tourist revenues, it is clear that Egypt needs more than a slogan to maintain its reputation. "Those who are not up to standard and who don't maintain quality and professionalism will not survive," says El-Mufti.

## Airport threshold

Organised by the Egyptian Tourist Chamber (ETC), the course aimed to create faster and better services for travellers to Cairo and drew 1,800 tourist representatives, the tourist police, passport, airport customs and security as well as EgyptAir representatives.

"First impressions are likely to affect the rest of a tourist's journey," said Mohamed Ottman, the course organiser and head of ETC Public Relations, adding that airport officials and travel agents can combine efforts and make a traveller either feel comfortable or frustrated.

The course acquainted travel agents with airport security, passport and custom regulations in order to better prepare them to provide "professional services," said Ottman.

The airport's deputy chief of security, Mohamed Hadayet, explained that a list of nationalities, who must register with security prior to arrival, has now been provided to travel agents for the sake of speedier service.

Travel agents are also now expected to acquaint tourists with customs regulations on electrical equipment, such as registering video cameras on passports on entry, lest they be taxed when the tourist leaves Egypt.

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Abdel-Aziz added that the joint venture mainly relate to marinas. "We shall cooperate to establish a marina

Coming out of a three-month training course, Cairo airport officials and travel agents seem ready to streamline services, writes Sherine Nasr

exams before they are appointed.

Airport taxi drivers and porters are not given licences before their legal status is investigated, said Hadayet. The taxi's destination is made known to the airport police before its departure from the airport. In the event of any violation, the driver's licence is withdrawn for three months. "We have to make sure that they are not a source of annoyance," he said.

According to Ottman, 3,000 taxi drivers will join another training course this month in an attempt to raise the quality of their services by convincing them that "good services directly reflect on their income," he said.

Although the training courses seem to have solved many daily problems that hinder smooth airport procedures, some chronic deficiencies remain. Ottman said the Cairo International Airport must cope with increasing numbers of tourists and that the airport is equipped with "only ten immigration counters," whereas other international airports have more.

The parking area is also distant from the airport buildings which is "all the more difficult for disabled tourists," he said, adding that airport improvements have, so far, only touched the surface.

## Venturing with Greece

The Egyptian and Greek tourist industries will develop joint travel packages to attract travellers from afar as far as the US, Canada, South East Asia and Latin America, reports Rehab Saad. "There will also be an exchange of statistical information, marketing experiences and joint ventures," said Adel Abdel-Aziz, the head of the Egyptian Tourist Authority, at a press conference this week.

Abdel-Aziz added that the joint venture mainly relate to marinas. "We shall cooperate to establish a marina

project in the Red Sea with common investments," he said.

John Stefanides, the head of the Greek Tourist Authority, who was accompanied by high-ranking Greek tourist officials, stressed that his visit and the signing of the protocol reflected the Greek government's commitment on tourist cooperation between the two countries and Greek love and respect for Egyptians. "We believe, in our country, that tourism develops and improves relations between nations. Our relations with Egypt have not been affected by the latest unfortunate incident," he said, referring to the shooting death of 18 Greek tourists in Cairo last month. "I am here today to be sure that nothing has affected our historical friendship with Egypt."

Stefanides suggested that there should be special arrangements for flights from distant countries to both Egypt and Greece. "Airfares should be reduced for those travellers who come from the US, for example, and wish to visit Egypt first, and then continue their flight to Athens. The transfer between Cairo and Athens should be at no extra cost. Although both Egyptian and Greek national airlines are independent from the ministries of tourism, we could work to convince them of the advantages of such a suggestion," he said.

Offering scholarships to both Egyptians and Greeks is an important factor to promote cooperation between the two countries, Stefanides said. "We have ten institutes of tourism in Greece where 2,000 students receive education. We wish to invite a number of Egyptian students to come and train in tourism," he said.

Asked what effect the shooting incident had on the number of visitors to Egypt, Stefanides said that Greeks are sceptical these days due to continuous news coverage on Greek and cable TV. Greek travel agencies, however, are still actively promoting and encouraging people to visit Egypt. "We, as a governmental tourist promotion authority, are trying to remove any negative impacts," Stefanides stressed. "Before I come here, I met some Greek shipping magnates who come to Egypt on a weekly basis. All said they would continue sailing at their usual schedules."

According to the head of the Greek Tourist Authority, about 45,000 Greeks visited Egypt in 1995 and this number is expected to reach 100,000 next year. Greece receives about 10 million tourists annually from Germany, Britain, Italy and France. The Greek tourist income ranges between \$6 and \$7 billion, said Stefanides.

## How to get there

### Bus

**Super Jet** East Delta and West Delta buses operate throughout Egypt.

**Super Jet** Stations are located in Almaza (Helipolis), Tahrir, Giza, Ramses Street and Cairo Airport. Buses travel to Alexandria, Port Said, Hurgada and Sharm.

**Cairo** Services almost every half hour from Sharm 7.30am to 10pm from Tahrir, then Giza, Almaza and the airport. Tickets LE12 until 9pm; LE24 until 3pm; LE24 until 5pm; LE24 thereafter.

**Alexandria** Services every half hour from Sharm 7.30am. Tickets LE24 from the airport, then LE24 each way.

**Cairo-Port Said** Services every half hour from Sharm 7.30am to 10pm from Tahrir, then Almaza, then Ramses Street. Tickets LE15 each way.

**Cairo-Hurghada** Services from 7am and 2pm, from Tahrir, then Giza and Almaza. Departs Hurghada noon and 5pm. Tickets LE48 until 5pm; LE45 thereafter, both each way.

**Alexandria-Hurghada** Services 8am, from Ramses Square, Alexandria. Departs Hurghada 2.30pm. Tickets LE36 each way.

**Cairo-Sharm El-Sheikh** Services 11pm, from Tahrir, then Almaza. Departs Sharm El-Sheikh 11pm. Tickets LE50 each way.

**East Delta Bus Company** Buses travel to Sharm, Suez, south Sinai, Suez and Ismailia. Buses to Ismailia and Suez depart from Qalati (near Ramses Square), Almaza and Tadig Square (near Helipolis). Buses to north and south Sinai depart from the Sharm bus station at Abuqiria Square.

**Cairo-Israelia** Services every 45 minutes from 6.30am to 4pm, from Qalati, then Almaza and Tadig Square. Tickets deluxe bus LE57; air-conditioned bus LE52, one way.

**Cairo-Suez** Services every half an hour from Qalati, then Almaza and Tadig Square. Tickets deluxe bus LE55; air-conditioned bus LE50, one way.

**Cairo-El-Arish** Services every hour from 7.30am to 4pm, from Qalati, then Almaza and Tadig Square. Tickets deluxe bus LE21; air-conditioned bus LE13, one way.

**Cairo-Sharm El-Sheikh** Services every 45 min. from 7am to 6.30pm from Abuqiria, then Almaza. Tickets morning LE27; evening LE48, one way.

**Cairo-Nuweiba** Services 8am, from Abuqiria, then Almaza. Tickets deluxe bus LE31.

**West Delta Bus** Stations at Tahrir and Almaza.

**Cairo-Hurghada** Services 9am, noon, 3pm, 10pm, 10.45pm, 11pm and 11.45pm. Tickets LE36 one way.

**Cairo-Safaga** Services 9am and 3pm. Tickets LE31 one way.

**Cairo-Qusseir** Service 10pm. Tickets LE38 one way.

**Cairo-Luxor** Service 9am. Tickets LE35 one way.

**Cairo-Arwan** Service 5pm. Tickets LE50 one way.

**Trains**

**Train** runs to Alexandria, Port Said, Luxor and Arwan, from Ramses Station.

**Cairo-Luxor-Arwan**

**French trains** Services to Luxor and Arwan. Services to Luxor and Arwan, morning 6.45am and 8.45am; 10.45am and 10am. Tickets to Luxor LE294 for foreigners and LE129 for Egyptians, to Arwan LE300 for foreigners, LE341 for Egyptians.

**Spanish trains** Services to Luxor and Arwan. 4.45pm, 8.45pm and 9.45pm. Tickets to Luxor, first class LE51; second class LE51; to Arwan, first class LE43; second class LE37.

**Cairo-Alexandria** Train services. VIP seats. Services 8am. Tickets LE22 without a meal; LE22 with a meal.

**Standard trains** Services 9am, 11am, noon, 3pm and 7pm. Tickets first class LE22; second class LE17.

**French trains** Services hourly from 8am to 10.30pm. Tickets first class LE21; second class LE20.

**Cairo-Port Said** Services 6.30am and 8.45am. Tickets first class LE45; second class LE26.

**EgyptAir**

**Cairo-Arwan** Flights 9am, 10.30am, 10.45am, 1pm, 3pm. Tickets LE300 for foreigners, LE391 for Egyptians, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Hurghada** Flights 7.15am, 7.30am, 10.30am and 4pm. Tickets LE238 for Egyptians, LE788 for foreigners, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Sharm El-Sheikh** Flights 6.45am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Taba** Flights 10.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Luxor** Flights 11.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Aswan** Flights 11.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Port Said** Flights 11.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Alexandria** Flights 11.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Port Said** Flights 11.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Aswan** Flights 11.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Hurghada** Flights 11.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Sharm El-Sheikh** Flights 11.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Taba** Flights 11.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

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**Cairo-Aswan** Flights 11.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

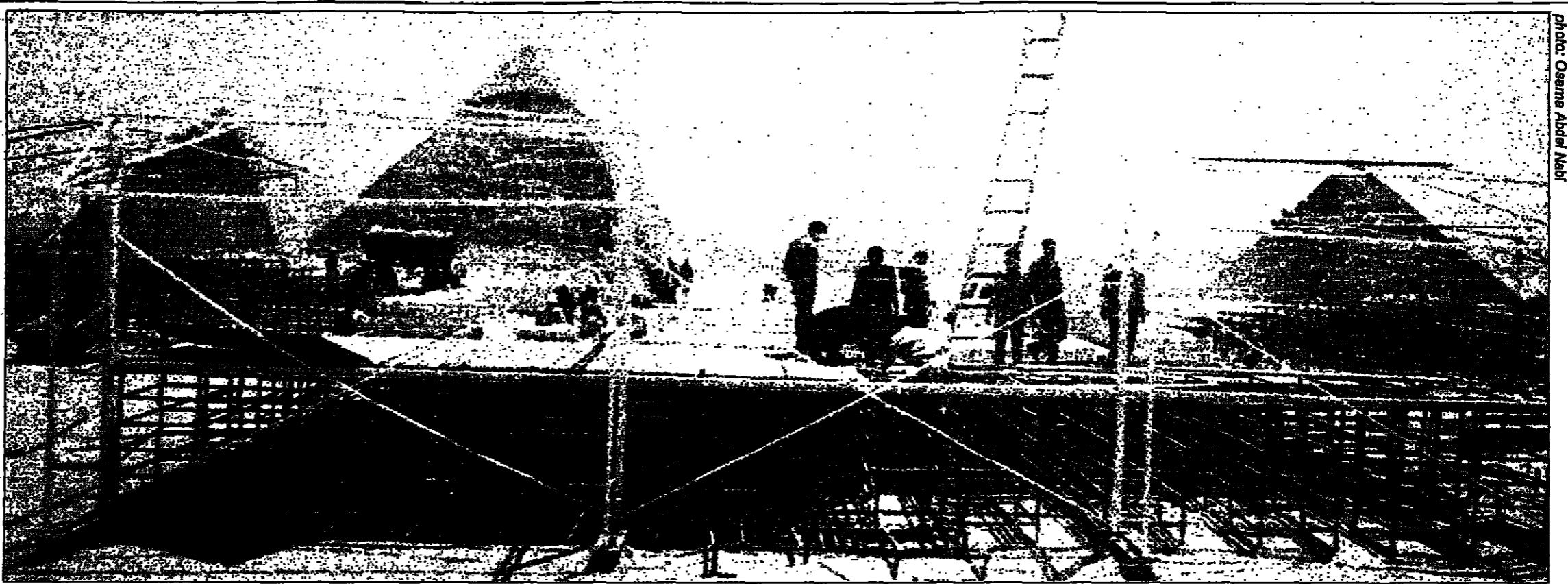
**Cairo-Port Said** Flights 11.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Alexandria** Flights 11.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

**Cairo-Port Said** Flights 11.30am. Tickets LE246 for Egyptians, LE211 for foreigners, both round-trip.

## Getting ready at Giza

SERIOUS preparations are underway at the Giza Pyramids, where the first Al-Ahram International Squash Championship will be taking place from 15-22 May. Tomorrow, the glass court will arrive from London, where it was specially manufactured for this prestigious event at a cost of 100,000 pounds sterling. It will be erected at the site on Saturday. Fifty-six players are to participate in the competition, which will be the world's second largest international squash event, with prize money amounting to \$100,000. The world's 22 highest-seeded players, including Pakistan's world champion Jansher Khan, are taking part, and players' performance in this competition will go towards their future world rankings.



## Volleyball's silver lining

The national volleyball team returned from the Emirates' Rashed International Championship with the silver medal

Second place may not seem much of a cause for celebration for a national team. But in the face of fierce competition, and the fact that Egyptian volleyball captain Fouad Abdel-Salam had requested permission to withdraw from the Rashed International Championship on grounds that many new members had insufficient experience, then the team's satisfaction with the silver medal is more understandable, writes Abeer Anwar.

Four countries joined Egypt in the Emirates for the championship, which took place from 12-19 April: Pakistan, India (ranked fifth in the last World Championship), Lebanon and the Emirates.

In view of the Egyptian football team's massive defeat in the Emirates' International Football Championship back in March, the volleyball team travelled to the Gulf knowing they had something to prove. Clearly the Egyptian expatriate community had little faith in the team. "No one came to watch. Even the Egyptian ambassador did not attend the matches until we promised him that we would win a respectable place and do something to improve Egypt's sporting image," said Mohamed Fathi, one of the team's more experienced players.

The competition was played as a round robin. Egypt's first match was against Pakistan, where the national team came from behind to snatch victory after a three-hour struggle. "We lost the first and second set, but then we woke up and took the next three sets to win the match 3-2," said Abdel-Salam. The following day, the team suffered a disappointing 0-3 defeat at the hands of

India, after a two-hour match, a loss they put down to exhaustion following their marathon with Pakistan.

However the team was able to bounce back to beat Lebanon 3-1 before facing what had been predicted to be their biggest challenge — the Emirates, playing on their home ground. Egypt knew that loss to the Emirates would relegate them to fourth place — a scenario they were unwilling to face. In the event, the Emirates failed to win a single set. The Egyptian team's 3-0 victory put them in second place behind India, the champions, with Pakistan in third.

The Egyptian team returned not only with the silver medal but with two cups. Emad Nasr, the national team's captain, won the title of best server, Mohamed Fathi, the prize for best receiver.

Both coach Abdel-Salam and technical expert Pittino Carmelo expressed their satisfaction at the team's achievement against the odds. "Winning second place in an event like this, at a time when there are lots of new faces in the team, is a great achievement, especially as the Indian team are so strong, with very tall players," commented Carmelo.

The Emirates Volleyball Federation has decided to make the championship an annual event, both to give the Emirates a place in the international volleyball scene and to promote the game within the country itself. And, with large sums offered as prize money — including 1,000 dirhams for the best player in each match — the championship is sure to prove a draw to many different countries in the future.

## Serve, spike, retire

At 28, Azza Taha has decided to retire from the world of volleyball. As her fans and teammates question why, Abeer Anwar investigates

"One day, you will be a famous volleyball player," a physical education instructor told nine-year-old Azza Taha. These words, uttered 19 years ago to a girl who then had no more than a casual interest in volleyball, helped propel Taha into a sport that would win her a gold medal in the 1986 Nairobi All Africa Games and a silver medal in the 1991 All Africa Games.

She also served as the women's national volleyball team captain and assisted the team in securing the gold in two Arab Championships, the first in 1991 and the second in 1995. In addition, the team, under her leadership, won first place in the African District Qualifications in Kenya in 1995 and for the first time since 1980, qualified for the 1995 World Cup.

Beside her teacher's words of inspiration, Taha attributes her success to her passion for the sport. She played on her Port Said school's volleyball team, and travelled for the first time in her life to Cairo with the team. She went on to play in the Port Said Club's team until 1985 when she was recruited into the ranks of the national team. From there, she practised in the Zamalek Club in order to be closer to her teammates. "Because of my love for the sport, I left my city and my family," Taha recalled.

For Taha, this was not an easy price to pay for her success, and would ultimately come back to haunt her, and, to the dismay of many in the athletic community, lead to her early retirement. Taha recently announced

that she will no longer compete on the international circuit, and will play only in domestic competitions. While this may be a surprise to many of her fans, her reasons, at least in her mind, are clear.

The first factor which led to her decision to retire was a fundamental disgruntlement with the Egyptian Volleyball Federation's somewhat lackadaisical attitude towards the national team. This feeling of disgruntlement was heightened by the Olympic Committee's decision to ban the team from participating in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

The second reason strikes more at the heart than the career. As a wife and a mother, Taha was saddened by the fact that she had to spend so much time away from her family. "Although I used to take Hafid, my daughter, with me to every training camp, whether it was in or outside Egypt, I felt that I didn't have enough time to sit down and discuss things with her," she said. "For seven years I have been able to strike a balance between volleyball and my personal life, and I've been the only player able to do so. But now, it's just not enough."

With the decision to retire firmly entrenched in her mind, Taha played her final match in the Zamalek Club last week. The match was between Zamalek's team and the national team. She retired on her birthday. "I chose this day so that I would have a life-long reminder of the sport. It will also help cheer me up when I think about having left the sport," said Taha.



photo: Amr Gamil

## Olympics countdown

**Tuning up**  
EIGHT-times Olympic champion Carl Lewis, world record holder Leroy Burrell, reigning Olympic champion Michael Marsh and others from the Santa Monica Track Club have reached a deal to compete at an Olympic lineup meeting on 18 May in Atlanta.

The deal will also bring Johnny Gray, Lamont Smith and miler Christian Cushing-Murray to the Olympic Stadium event.

**Sydney powerlines**  
SPARKED by an American executive's criticism of Sydney's unsightly power lines, the city is moving the cables underground in time for the 2000 Olympics.

Five kilometres of overhead power lines and their massive steel-framed towers will be removed at a cost of about \$32 million.

## World Cup battlefield

With less than a month left for FIFA to announce the 2002 World Cup host, there is no sign of an end to hostilities between the two would-be hosts, Japan and South Korea, writes Eric Asomugha

Nine months ago FIFA, the world football body, announced that it was delaying its decision on who would host the 2002 World Cup. It was hoped that the intervening period would see an end to the seemingly acrimony between the two potential hosts, South Korea and Japan. But instead, the new 1 June deadline will soon be upon us, and the situation is no closer to being resolved. Fuelled by deep-seated historical resentments, and less deep-seated political and economic concerns, the rivals remain antagonistic as ever, employing every possible diplomatic tactic, shunning to various corners of the globe, lobbying for support, and in the meantime placing FIFA in a very difficult position.

Their campaign methods have gone so far as to attract the attention of politicians, as well as sports officials, both within the countries concerned and outside.

In an effort to put an end to the confrontation, some of the continental federa-

tions are now proposing that the two nations host the tournament, the first World Cup to be held in Asia since 1930, jointly. But this course could open another can of worms. The proposal runs counter to FIFA's charter, which states that the World Cup should be hosted by one nation. To allow South Korea and Japan to play joint hosts would require a meeting of FIFA's congress to change the body's charter.

Such an operation would be a litmus test for President Joao Havelange's leadership of FIFA. Havelange is currently embroiled in a power struggle with the president of European football's governing body, UEFA, Lennart Johansson over UEFA's documents, *Vision One* and *Two*, in which UEFA lay the groundwork for a new order in world football. The documents propose that FIFA's committee system should be reorganised democratically, and that FIFA should subsidise football's worldwide development from profits gained from selling World

Cup television rights. If the co-hosting proposal gets as far as a FIFA congress, that congress could be seen as a vote of confidence for Havelange.

According to Viken Djizmedjian of the Confederation of African Football (CAF), the African football body support the co-hosting proposal. Meanwhile, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) is solidly behind the scheme. AFC President Sultan Ahmed Shah expressed his concern that the campaign had got way out of hand in a letter to FIFA and the heads of the four continental federations. He argued that the situation was unhealthy for FIFA, the AFC, for the future of the World Cup and of the game itself. "It is our duty to take control of the situation so that the sanity and morality of football are maintained at all times," he wrote.

So far there has been no official comment from either of the warring camps, but Ken Nagamura, deputy chairman of the World Cup Japan 2002 Bidding Committee, in Cairo for a seminar organised by CAF in co-operation with Japan 2002 in April, said that FIFA's rules for selecting World Cup hosts clearly required that the event should be hosted by a single nation. "We abide by this and I think FIFA should too. But if FIFA decides to alter its stand, we have to respect it because its decision is final."

The co-hosting idea was first mooted in both Japan and South Korea as early as last July, but the scheme caused a public outcry in South Korea, where memories of Japan's record in World War II remain very much alive. FIFA's South Korean vice-president, Chung Mong-Joon, who is a supporter of the UEFA *Vision* documents and a critic of Havelange, is thought by observers to be making moves towards an alliance with UEFA in order to give South Korea a better chance.

While some approve his actions, others feel that alienating FIFA's president would not, on the face of it, seem a good tactical move for the South Koreans. Japan and South Korea both have good

records in hosting major international sports events, and are technologically more than able to cope with an event like the World Cup. Both have hosted the Olympic Games and various world class championships in the past. As far as football goes, South Korea has qualified for the World Cup finals on a few occasions; Japan has not. But on the other hand, Japan is ahead of South Korea in FIFA's football ranking released on 1 May. Japan moved three steps forward, from its previous position of 31, to 29. South Korea moved 13 places back, from 46 to 59.

Whatever the pros and cons, one thing is certain. It is decision time for FIFA, which has until 1 June to announce the location of World Cup 2002. Lovers of football the world over await its decision, and hope that somehow a way is found to ensure that the World Cup, football's biggest and best event, does not become a battlefield.

Edited by Inas Mazhar



## Gamil Rateb: Ancien régime rebel

For a gentleman among gentlemen with a taste for social justice, reconciling a passion for acting with a penchant for political commitment is easy

Gamil Rateb is a stickler for punctuality. "Whatever you do, don't be late," he was told. Outdoing ourselves, we arrived ten minutes ahead of time. As we were ushered in, a bistroted shadow could be glimpsed hurrying towards the back of the apartment. Obviously we were expected, but neither a minute before nor a minute after.

Gamil Rateb's apartment is situated at the most distinguished address in Zamalek, one that unmistakably bespeaks established aristocracy. The interior confirms the impression: *ancien régime* taste and inherent elegance. It would be vulgar to assume that any of the priceless pieces could have been bought at any time, almost as disrespectful as contemplating the circumstances of the Pope's birth. This is the wealth inherited by many generations.

"It is my mother's apartment," says Gamil Rateb — having caught us examining a beautiful Bursara — as he breezes in, not a second after the hour. His mother was the daughter of Omar Sultan Huda Shaarawi's brother. "Now the apartment is mine," continues Gamil. "I keep it for entertaining. In Paris we live differently. People come in for a drink then we all go to a restaurant. Here, I invite people at home." I am quite sure that the rich and famous are delighted to be asked.

Right now, however, Gamil's mind is not on entertaining. He has a leading role in a TV serial to be shown soon. "The scenario is by Katia Sabet," he says, "and I play the part of a rich landowner from the Said, somewhere in Minya, with a domineering personality, ruling with an iron fist over his family, his land and his future heir." The man, explains Gamil, was not born to money. He came from a much simpler background. He was employed by very rich people and made his fortune alone. He is now getting back at the world for the bad treatment he received in the past. This leads him to control the little village completely and he does not hesitate to use illegal means to maintain this position.

Gamil seems to derive a certain personal pleasure from his portrayal of the evil, *nouveau riche* landowner. "I was born to wealth," he says. "From the start, I found it uncomfortable. Not that my parents treated the servants badly. On the contrary. By comparison, ours were treated rather well. Still, I could not accept the inequality."

He grew up in a household of women: his mother and his two sisters. His parents were separated when he was very young. He found "the females" overbearing. He is grateful to his father for having stuck to the decision of sending him to a government school. "I find scandalous that the so-called educated people of my generation only speak foreign languages," he says indignantly. But when Gamil speaks French it is so authentic that one is surprised to learn that he is equally fluent in Arabic and English.

After the government schools, he was transferred to the French Lycee, where there was a section preparing for the Egyptian Baccalaureate. It is there that he suddenly found out what he would be doing for the rest of his life. His sister was very active in the school's amateur theatre troupe. "I was slim and... well... rather

good looking," he explains shyly. "I was given a part in a play at once." Up till then, he had been shy and introverted. All those women in the family had been too much, really. On stage, he felt "that he was existing for the first time", that he was noticed, listened to. That pleased him immensely. He was then offered a small part in a film, appearing in one small scene. The director liked it so much that he promised him the role of the *jeune premier* in his next film. Gamil was full of enthusiasm. He vaguely imagined that his family might object to an actor in the family, but since he would be working, he reasoned, he would leave home as soon as he could afford to, so their objections would have no effect. He was wrong. His very influential family contacted the producer of the film and demanded that Rateb's scene be cut out of the production, thwarting — or rather postponing — his debut in Egyptian movies. The family went further to make sure that all doors would be closed — that no producer would even dare to give him a part.

At the age of twenty, he decided not to beat around the bush any longer and announced his intention to become an actor, loudly and clearly. His assertiveness

comfortable about my family's wealth. I had the little money they sent me but I did not tell the others, some of whom were really very poor. I was ashamed to be a little better off. I revelled in the feeling that I was like them. But what had been a game to a certain extent soon became reality. The family cut off his personal funds. "As long as my sisters were in Paris I had a place to stay, and they fed me of course, but when they returned to Egypt I was left to fend for myself." His mother believed that he would stick it out for a month — maybe two. Sooner or later, however, he was bound to toe the line. But young Gamil had other ideas. He worked in the Halls carrying crates of vegetables, worked as a translator, then washed dishes in a friend's restaurant. "Not for long, though; my friend realised that I wasn't gifted in this line of work," he says. He was perfectly happy now. The pages devoted to his family in the Who's Who of Egyptian society no longer bothered him. He had cut himself off completely.

His new family was the academy. "They were artists and intellectuals and I discovered that we had the same ideas about human behaviour," he says. There was no social, racial or gender discrimination. "We were all

ever belonging to a party. What was happening in Egypt, the 1952 Revolution, no longer concerned him, he thought. He was nevertheless happy to see the king go. And his family? Did they lose much? "Well, they deserved to lose it. Besides, I don't think they were exactly left destitute. I am a staunch Nasserist and I consider that the revolution was very generous... After all, no one was butchered, which was not the case in other countries; my family was no longer omnipotent, but they still had many blessings left to count. Moreover, it was no longer any of my concern," he concludes with a mischievous laugh, inspired no doubt by the notion of his family being taught a lesson in humility. Instead, at the time, he was miffed not to be able to vote in his adopted country — he was not French, although he often forgot it — but soon found a way around the difficulty: "Many young people who had the right to vote did not know who to vote for, they were not politically committed. So I helped them along, casting their ballots — for my candidates of course," he says. For whom did he vote? Whoever promised social justice. All his life he has been disturbed by the fact that the rich are so rich and the poor so poor. Every human being

Besides being a cruel landowner in *Katia Sabet*'s TV serial, around mid-July Rateb will start rehearsals for *Hamlet*, which he is directing for the National Theatre in France. He was King Claudius at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, with Jean-Louis Trintignant in the role of Hamlet. "It is a play I know well," he says. "This is why when Huda Wasfi asked me to direct it I accepted immediately." He does not plan to act in this play, except maybe as the phantom. "I intend to film the phantom and then project it during the performance." He mulls over this for a while: the evanescence of the phantom, a shadow's reflection. "If I decide to do this, then I will play the part of the phantom and film myself." There are no morbid undertones to this idea: it is quite a crafty way of being part of the performance without actually being there. He would hate being tied up with a lengthy theatre role. He is satisfied. "I played extraordinary roles in the theatre with top actors and directors. So now, unless the part is very tempting, I refuse it, especially in a play which will run for a long time," he says. He was tempted, however, two years ago, when he accepted a role with Sanaa Gamil, in Durrenmatt's *La visite de la veille dame* ("The Old Lady's Visit") directed by Mohamed Sobhi, "whom I like very much". Ten performances at the Opera: his schedule could afford that. He liked the play and his part was "very interesting". Again last year another temptation came his way. He directed *Scheherazade* at Al-Hanager, acting too, but "this was for a limited time, 15 performances only."

He wants to be free when French cinema beckons. Last December he played in *L'eau qui dort* ("Still Waters"), and just before that in *Jusqu'au bout de la nuit* ("Till the End of the Night"), a Gérard Blin classic. Another French film may be coming up in June but Rateb won't talk about it. He has not signed yet.

Acting may be Rateb's life, but his other concerns are more pressing than ever. "When one reaches a certain intellectual maturity, one cannot pretend not to see the reality which surrounds us or claim that it does not concern us. We are all in it together. I am extremely interested in what is happening in the world, politically and socially, gender relations, racism issues, social reforms, human rights. I am completely committed to these causes and always make my position known officially. It has caused me some harm professionally but I don't really care. If there is one thing I cannot tolerate, it is injustice. I take advantage of my position in the limelight, of my partial immunity as a known actor, to defend and develop my ideas, I consider it a duty. People should be committed to their beliefs and be ready to defend them, whatever they are. I consider it cowardly not to do so." He is often told that he is not a politician but an actor and should therefore not be concerned, "but when I vote," says Gamil, "I do so as a citizen, not as an actor. The films I choose these days are those which defend a cause, and it is in this measure that they interest me."

He has overcome the agonies of youth, when coming from an aristocratic background or simply being financially comfortable bothered him so much. "One doesn't need to be poor, deprived of rights or a woman to defend the oppressed." On the contrary, he says, birth, fame and money can be put to work to advance the cause one is fighting for.

His agenda? To use all his privileges to fight poverty, racism, intolerance, bigotry and injustice (a few of his demons). He has done so much already in the domain of cultural exchanges that the French government has decorated him with the order of Chevalier des Arts et Lettres and made him Chevalier de l'Ordre du Mérite in recognition of his achievements. He has a packed programme ahead, but one to which he is devoting the same determination he used at twenty to become an actor.

Profile by Fayza Hassan



Clockwise: Gamil Rateb in *Scherezaade*; with Tilda Thamar; with Michele Gulinelli as Mao; in *The Old Lady's Visit* with Sanaa Gamil; with Youssra in *Sayedat Al-Qahira* (The Lady of Cairo); in support of Youssef Chahine; with Faten Hamama.

took the family by surprise. He had never asked for anything in his entire life and now he was suddenly coming out with this preposterous statement. The grandson of Mohamed Sultan Pasha, Huda Shaarawi's nephew, an actor? This was unheard of. Their refusal to listen stimulated him, confirmed him in his intention. He had never felt much kinship for his social milieu but now he was sure he did not belong. Nothing was going to make him budge from his position. Finally they relented and he was told that he would be enrolled in the School of Political Science in Paris. If he wanted to study acting on the side — just as a hobby, of course — no one would object.

He went to Paris with his sisters. He did go to the School of Political Science once, to enrol. He went to the Academy of Dramatic Arts on the same day and there found that he was in the "right place". The students came from all over the world, all walks of life. "We were all equal there. And since my family had prevented me from acting in Egypt I was never going to go back. From that moment on I considered myself an immigrant in France. I was no longer un-

ited by the same passion." It is with them that he acquired a political and social conscience, taking stands, going along with actors' strikes. But even so, he still perceived his family status as a handicap in his new life. He wanted to be anonymous like his comrades and often went a long way to achieve this purpose. "One day, one of the actors landed a small part. He used all the money he had earned to invite us to the restaurant. When I saw the happiness of my companions wolfing down their meal, I regretted not having used the money I received from home for similar feasts, especially that at the time the Egyptian pound was so strong. A few would have gone a long way in the restaurant-hopping department. Now that I knew my fellow actors better, I realised that they would not have excluded me for my good fortune, but gladly shared it with me instead. It was too late, however. This source had dried out and so did all my problems about my origins." It is during this time that he began to know and appreciate people who were really struggling to make ends meet. "I understood what they were going through and felt very close. I also learned about luck, about those who have too much of it while others have none. All this confirmed me in what would have been considered 'progressive' thinking back home."

In France, he involved himself in politics without

going anywhere in the world should have the right to a decent life and free access to culture, he believes. And he has always been prepared to fight for this belief. "I could have gone to prison," he says. "So what? Inji [Afaf] went to prison, I admired her very much, I would have gladly done the same to wipe out injustice." Did Inji, a very close childhood friend, influence his politics? "I don't think so, we just thought on the same lines regarding poverty, but before I left Egypt in 1947 all I could think of really was being an actor; I was not into politics then." Gamil Rateb, a political French literature of the time. Here, now, he belongs to the Tagamma Party, because he needs to be part of low actors better. He realised that they would not have excluded me for my good fortune, but gladly shared it with me instead. It was too late, however. This source had dried out and so did all my problems about my origins." It is during this time that he began to know and appreciate people who were really struggling to make ends meet. "I understood what they were going through and felt very close. I also learned about luck, about those who have too much of it while others have none. All this confirmed me in what would have been considered 'progressive' thinking back home."

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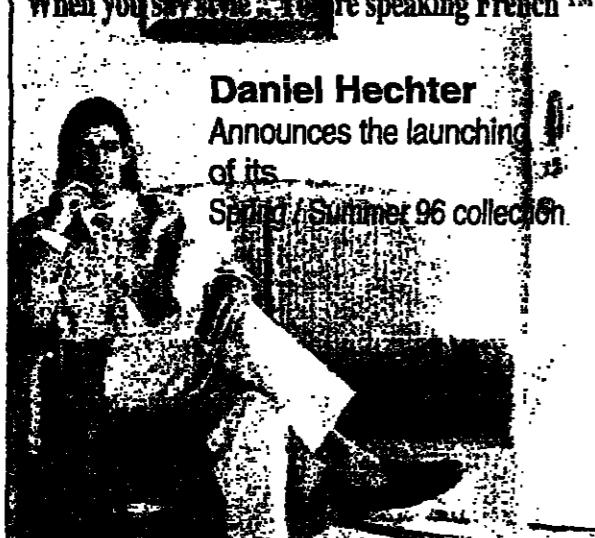
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Just before my dear friend, internationally renowned actor Omar Sharif left Egypt recently, he called me and asked

me to join him on a short trip to France, where he was to take on some of the world's top bridge players at the Sofitel-Sèvres

3rd annual General bridge championship. Much as I would have loved to, I couldn't bring myself to tell him that nothing puts me to sleep more quickly than being stuck in a room of people

playing a game that I quite honestly find to be the most boring thing imaginable. After all, Omar did list bridge as his all-time favourite recreation in *Who's Who*.

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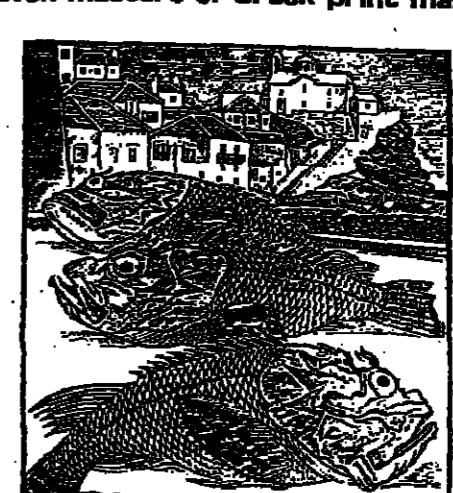
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